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## "That's just the breaks": the ethics and representation in non-fiction writing

Maria Loukianenko Wolfe

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**“That’s just the breaks”: The ethics and representation in non-fiction writing**

by

**Maria Loukianenko Wolfe**

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

Major: Rhetoric and Professional Communication

Program of Study Committee:  
Margaret Baker Graham, Major Professor  
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Ames, Iowa

2008

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To those who want their voices to be heard and  
those who believe it is possible

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### **Abstract**

The dissertation shares the results of an ethnographic research that investigated the production of a memoir written by a former Peace Corps volunteer, who spent two years teaching in a small town in eastern Russia. In her memoir, the author used private information (including real names) gathered from the participants – native and non-native speakers – and published a book for a general public, predominantly English-speaking readers in the United States. The book is being successfully sold online and adds to the long list of published Peace Corps memoirs.

The purpose of the project was to examine the ethical issues involved in the production and reception of this non-fiction narrative that had transferred real events and people into the public area of communication, through the processes of writing and publishing the memoir. Subjects of the research included the author of the book, the Russian participants, and the researcher herself, since she had lived and worked in the place described in the book during the time of the author's visit, knows the Russian participants, and participated in most of the events in the book. The research was guided by feminist methodology that included unstructured conversations with the participants, collaboration through the participants' reviews of the research drafts, and inclusion of multiple voices through non-traditional discourses (auto-ethnography, parallel storytelling, and a rhetorically constructed conversation).

The study was conducted under the influence of the cultural and professional communication ethnographic research, and poststructuralist and post-colonial criticism. The research investigated issues of intellectual capitalist production and the problem of

the Other in contemporary qualitative research. It challenged the ethos of the Peace Corps by establishing links between the genre of a Peace Corps memoir and exploitation of the Other, capitalist production, and exercise in Western power. Given the “business” tools and vocabulary that the genre of Peace Corps memoirs has been using (online resources for successful publishing, workshops, sales and profits, etc.), the researcher argues that Peace Corps writing is an example of entrepreneurship and a highly rhetorical enterprise.

“No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are now at the center of my talk.” (bell hooks 152)

Khromov: That’s just the law...

Istomin: There are things that are above the law.

Khromov: What can be above the law?

Istomin: Truth.

Khromov: Then, truth is above everything?

Istomin: No, there is yet something else that is above truth.

Khromov: What is it then?

Istomin: Mercy.

(from *Apostol/Apostle*)



## Chapter 1. Introduction

“One aspect of the electronic, postmodern world is that there has been a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient is viewed... The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, ‘different’; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal.’” (Said 26, 40)

This project started two summers ago, when I came across a Peace Corps memoir written about my former town and my former job back in Russia, in the late 1990s. An online retailer that was selling the book has a “surprise me” site feature that allows the customer to pull out a random page from a book. Indeed, I was more than surprised when I read a page from the memoir and saw familiar names of my friends and former colleagues along with astonishingly personal stories and sometimes unflattering portraits of their lives. What made these people consent to this openly public display of some of the most private parts of their stories? Or *did* they consent?

\*\*\*

For centuries, rhetoricians have been using information that is considered personal or private to achieve a certain rhetorical effect and relate to the audiences. Consider a recent presidential campaign for Tom Vilsack. According to Patrick Coolican, the former Iowa Governor employed “a compelling personal narrative” as “an important part of [his] presidential campaign” (“Cheering on Tom”). His bio had a special note, “orphaned at birth,” and his rhetoric often included a story of his troubled adoptive parents and a self-made success through college and then law school. Vilsack’s story of orphaned childhood helped him establish integrity: An apparent base for Vilsack’s support was forming because the story added humble upbringing to the former

Governor's ethos, which many common people were willing to relate to. Thus, the private helped create the representation that many would find politically compelling.

Most often, the private has turned into the public in order to establish ethos and credibility, and employ an effective appeal through pathos. However, the situation of transferring private information into the public sphere may raise a number of ethical concerns, especially in cases when writers and researchers study, document, and represent through texts lives of others.

The issue becomes particularly crucial in our age of consumerism and ethical controversies in business, politics, and mass culture. Transferring the private into the public has become almost a routine procedure and is widely accepted as well, as long as it brings the desired result. However, in the discipline of rhetoric, we have been experiencing development in theory and methodology that increases ethical awareness and expands possibilities for creating a multilayered and inclusive representation, in replacement of an earlier, traditionally univocal rhetoric that would strive to create an 'objective' public discourse.

Postmodern and poststructural critique of objective knowledge and relationship between language and reality, postcolonial critique of objectifying the subject, and feminist critique of exclusiveness of research and representation marked the end of the last and the beginning of this century. These critiques made traditional qualitative research and discourse production problematic in terms of its objectives, methodologies, and procedures. Specifically, qualitative research has been questioned about its limiting topics and methods, the way it constructs the ethos of the researcher, how it treats the ethnographic subject, and what kind of representation it creates (Clifford and Marcus,

Mortensen and Kirsch, and Brown and Dobrin). These critiques have provided direction and objectives to this project.

The dissertation is a combination of theoretical and empirical research. The questions raised by cultural studies and postmodern ethnographic research about ethics and representation in non-fiction and academic writing will be the starting point of the dissertation. I will attempt to explore, through a qualitative study, issues of ethics and representation that writers and researchers deal with when writing about others. I will ground my research in a conceptual framework based on several theories. These theories use different terms to refer to ethnographic subject (in anthropology), the Other (in critical ethnography), and the subaltern (in critical cultural studies and postcolonial critique). In this project, therefore, I will use interchangeably the terms “the Other,” “the subject,” and “the subaltern” to refer to these others that we try to represent through our texts, including the text I will analyze and the text of this dissertation. In this introduction, I will explain the research background and suggest research questions.

### **Research Background and Questions**

For my dissertation I am investigating the production of a Peace Corps memoir, written and published for a general public. The memoir is titled *Beyond Siberia* and written by Sharon Dirlam, a former Peace Corps volunteer, who chronicles her life during 1996-1998, in one of the least known parts of Russia – Russian Far East. During that time, Sharon lived in a small town Birobidjan, which also is the center of Jewish Autonomous Region, and worked as an English instructor in Birobidjan Pedagogical Institute. She kept a travel journal that became the material for the book.

The memoir includes information we usually consider private, such as the real names of the characters<sup>1</sup> and their personal, often quite intimate stories. The preliminary research uncovered that some of the characters were unaware of the book and their role in it, and many felt deeply hurt by the author's decision to turn the private into the public without their consent. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the book is mostly about people from remote Eastern Russia, who, due to their disadvantageous position (economic, geographic, etc.), cannot voice their opinions about the book.

To publish the book, Sharon and her husband established their own small publishing company, and started selling the memoir through an online retailer, Amazon.com, which is not available for the consumers in Russia. Four of the Russian characters, however, received the book from Sharon, who mailed copies directly to Birobidjan. They shared these copies with other Russians, and most of those who read the book, had a strong negative reaction because of the way their stories had been told and the public display of their private lives. However, none of those Russians who were hurt by such a representation confronted the author.

Therefore, the research was triggered by the very obvious ethical dilemma of and rhetorical strategies for turning the private into the public. I happened to be in the unique position that allowed me to speak from both perspectives: the characters' and the author's. During the same years of 1996-1998, I was a lecturer at Birobidjan Pedagogical Institute and was aware of or even participated in most of the events discussed in the memoir. Moreover, although my name and my stories were not included in the book, the

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<sup>1</sup> I am using the term "characters" because the memoir is not an academic text and the term "subjects" or something similar would not be appropriate. Also, the authors herself used the term "characters" when she referred to the people described in her book.

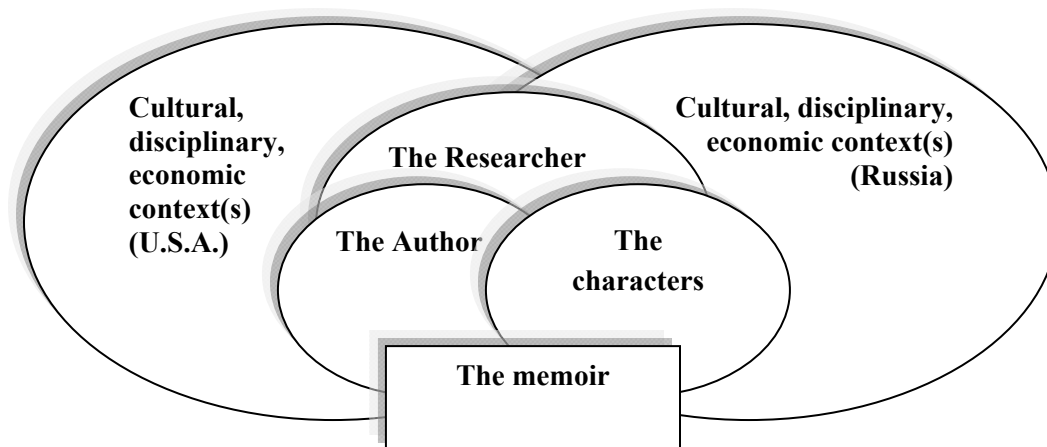
Russian characters were either my friends, or former colleagues. This is why I considered *Beyond Siberia* to be, to a certain extent, *my* story as well. On the other hand, as an author and a writer of my own research, I felt that I was able to understand the motives and mechanisms of a text production, especially a text written about others. Additionally, my education and background equipped me with theories and methodologies necessary to critically approach any discussion about representation and ethical choices writers make in their texts.

The research originally planned to uncover the hidden side of the memoir, to include the Russian characters' opinions and emotions, and to investigate the consequences of the private/public dilemma. From the very start, I viewed the Russian characters as the subject/the Other/the subaltern of an ethnographic research. Simultaneously, I started looking into the issues of power and capital production: The genre of a Peace Corps memoir appeared to be a successfully run business supported by the means of postcolonial exploitation. I was inspired by Kirsch and Ritchie who call for ethnographic research to "be used as 'praxis' to help those who participate with [researchers] in research to understand and change their situation, to help those who have been marginalized to speak for themselves" (25). I wanted the Russian characters, who happened to be marginalized during the production of *Beyond Siberia*, to tell their own stories.

However, as the project developed, it has evolved into a more complex, multilayered study of ethics and representation in non-fiction writing that went far beyond the production of the given memoir. Other ethical concerns and layers have started to appear in my research. For instance, I realized that much of my contemplation

about ethics would return, like a boomerang, to my own power position as a researcher and my way of thinking about the study, which seemed to uncover more differences than similarities between the Russian characters and me. The researcher/participants' relationship has turned out to be as ethically loaded as the author/characters' relationship that started my research.

In addition, the dynamics of the research, where the researcher, the author, and the characters/participants are all involved in intercultural communication, adds yet more perspectives to my discussion of ethics and representation in non-fiction writing. Amongst some of the viewpoints that I feel are necessary to address are the ethical position(s) of the author, the characters of the book and participants of the research, and the researcher herself. These viewpoints, however, do not exist in a vacuum but are influenced by larger rhetorical contexts: cultural, disciplinary, and economic, to name just a few. Figure 1 illustrates the complexity of and interrelations between all these multiple perspectives that I needed to consider in my research:



**Figure 1.** Layers of research

The order in which the areas on the graph overlap with each other illustrates the progression of my research: from small and very specific to broader and more complex. It started with the text itself and my willingness to uncover what is behind it. I immediately identified with the position of the characters, since, in a way, I am one of them. Then I tried to see the position of the author behind her stories about the characters. At that moment, I started realizing that my own position affects my views about the memoir's ethics and representation, so I had to add myself to the graph. Finally, as I attempted to analyze where I stand as a researcher and what rhetorical factors affect my position, I realized that similar factors affect all the multiple positions and views of the author and the characters. Thus, I configured bigger circles of the rhetorical context(s) on the graph. As a result, all parts of the graph have multiple overlaps and can be shifted easily. I anticipate that such a mobility and interdependence should illustrate the complexity of any discussion of ethics, rhetoric, and representation, as these discussions do not offer any ready-made answers. Moreover, the largest circles - rhetorical context(s) - produce *institutions* that will construct and affect the multiple ethical positions as well. For instance, the institutions of Peace Corps and Western academia, where the author and the researcher belong respectively, might be examples of different ethical positions.

Generally, the following questions guided my research:

- What factors influence decisions about ethics and representation in non-fiction writing (in answering this question, I will be discussing not only the production of the Peace Corps memoir, but also the production of my own research, as yet another example of non-fiction writing)?
- How does the situation of intercultural communication affect these decisions?

I believe that answering these questions will add to the recent critiques of representation and knowledge production in qualitative research, which I will discuss in the next chapter. The postmodern and feminist arguments about the arbitrary nature of both philosophical (e.g., truth and knowledge) and social (e.g., gender and language) constructs support the necessity to take a critical stance towards our own research and writing about others. I anticipate that my analysis of the multiple layers and forces that participate in the production of the memoir (those on the graph and beyond) should help in the analysis of its ethics and representation. From the most radical position, I hope to suggest in my research a critique of the new ways of colonization in the postmodern era, through non-fiction writing (e.g., the memoir).

In the next chapter, I will review relevant literature on theory and practice, to build a conceptual framework for this dissertation. I will first discuss the historical development of such philosophical constructs as truth, knowledge, and ethics, to argue that they became the basis of the contemporary Western measures for moral behavior. Then, I will review the existing critiques of such measurement.



## Chapter 2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

“[C]laims to truth are always discursively situated and implicated in relations of power.”  
(Kincheloe and McLaren 299)

“[W]hat is commonly circulated by [cultural discourse] is not ‘truth’ but representations.”  
(Said 21)

The complexity of the ethical problems and multiple views presented by rhetoric from different voices and layers in my research suggest that the conceptual framework might not come easily and the result will be quite complex as well. It will be important then to start with the historical perspective of the relationship between rhetoric and ethics, in order to understand the roots of certain views on ethics that the research participants may exhibit. It will be equally important to ground my qualitative study in the more recent, critical theories of rhetoric and communication, if I want to produce ethically responsible research myself.

Such a discussion is not new. The dilemma of the relationship between ethics and rhetoric has been debated for hundreds of years. Protagoras argued that civic virtue can be taught; Plato demanded that ethics accompany truth and be an essential part of rhetoric; Aristotle developed a structural and thus teachable approach to practicing *phronesis*, the highest virtue of the mind; Quintilian saw orator’s moral virtues as an absolute necessity; for Augustine, faith was a guide for morale; Vico viewed ethics and rhetoric as inseparable; Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God, which, for many, was equal to burying moral principles; Foucault and Derrida argued that the binaries (including those of true/false and moral/unethical) are not given but constructed through language; finally, the postmodern thought claims that laws of morale are institutionalized,

and being moral is the act of accepting responsibility (cf., Bauman). Contemporary scholars add more questions about the relationship between ethics and rhetoric. Thus, Carlacio and Gillam wonder who has the authority to decide what is ethical “given the absence of foundational truth for many of us,” and “What is the relationship between private moral beliefs and a negotiated sense of public morality?” (159).

As rhetoric has developed along with human thought, our understanding of truth and ethics has changed as well. I will start by tracing the development of ethics in rhetoric, to establish and illustrate parallels between our understanding of ethics and true knowledge. I will argue that discussion of such parallels should help us better navigate the complexity of ethics in a rhetorical act<sup>2</sup>. Granted, I won’t be able to include all contributors, but will discuss the few most important in my discussion of rhetoric and ethics.

The origin of the problem goes back to the dispute between ancient Greek philosophers and the Sophists (such as Protagoras and Gorgias) after the latter declared their pedagogical skills to teach virtue along with eloquence. From the very start, “[t]he two activities of making men virtuous and making them eloquent were inextricably intermingled” (Hunt 131). According to the Sophists, all knowledge was an opinion and could be measured by an individual’s own sense of perception. Just as there are multiple opinions of truth, there are multiple opinions of what is good/ethical. As Protagoras argued in a dialogue with Socrates, “So diverse and multiform is goodness that even with us the same thing is good when applied externally but deadly when taken internally”

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<sup>2</sup> I am using the word “act” here since I view language as an action: deliberate and with consequences. Following postmodern thought, discourse is not what it *is* but what it *does*. Therefore, it is necessarily rhetorical and ethically charged.

(“Dialogues” 329). For the Sophists, power of language preceded universal truth (*aletheia*), as the latter was illusory. As Stroeve put it, “Gorgias, rejecting the pretensions of pure reason, holds that only the incantatory power of words can overcome subjectivism or solipsism” (12). Since truth is unrecognizable, “the teaching of virtue is irrelevant; Gorgias tried to teach instead the means for arousing the passion for virtue” (Stroeve 13). The claim of Sophists that they could teach anyone virtue, along with eloquence, became the main cause of Plato’s critique of rhetoric.

The nature of and relationship between truth and goodness are in the center of Plato’s *Phaedrus* and *Gorgias*. Not only did Plato argue for the possibility of true knowledge, but for him real goodness (true ethics) was inseparable from this knowledge and could only be acquired through it. Plato constructed a hierarchy, where philosophical “truth” presided over rhetorical persuasion. In *Gorgias*, Plato criticized the Sophists, who cared only for appearance and persuasion but not for justice. He said that “rhetoric... is a producer of persuasion for belief, not for instruction in the matter of right and wrong” (in Bizzell and Herzberg 92b) and that “the rhetorician... does not know what is really good or bad, noble or base, just or unjust<sup>3</sup>” (in Bizzell and Herzberg 94a). Because rhetoricians were not concerned with justice but could easily argue for either side of an issue, rhetoric could not be treated as art; it was *techne*. Since philosophers believed that virtue could be acquired only through art, then rhetorical *techne* was not capable of teaching true virtue through language; hence, the separation between ethics and rhetoric.

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<sup>3</sup> Note that the concepts of “justice,” “ethics,” and “truth” have already been collapsed into a unifying category of goodness that, from Plato’s time on, has been in the prime position for moral measurement.

Aristotle followed Plato by focusing primarily on reason and things that are certain, and thus can be classified, studied, and described precisely. Rhetoric and language for Aristotle were tools that allow us to match ideas and make decisions about practical matters. Therefore, ethics became more of a pragmatic issue for Aristotle: Instead of trying to find what the virtue is, we are trying to become good men<sup>4</sup>; it is practical. At the core of Aristotle's ethics was his theory of virtues - virtues of character (moral virtues) and virtues of mind (intellectual virtues). Working together, they constitute a particular type of person who is able to make correct judgment – the person of practical wisdom (*phronesis*), the one with “balanced emotional dispositions,” who “will respond emotionally to situations in just the appropriate way” (Hughes 67). In his most pragmatic view, Aristotle argued that a person with practical wisdom not only could control emotions in the most practical, rational way<sup>5</sup>, but could make the most ethical choices. Thus, ethics once again followed reason, and moral virtues were simply “habitual disposition[s] connected with choice, lying in a mean relative to us, a mean which is determined by reason, by which the person of practical wisdom would determine it” (Aristotle II, 6, 1106b36-1107a2). Moreover, these habitual dispositions (*hexis*) could and should be developed by training, since “[t]he function of a human being is achieved in accordance with practical wisdom and moral virtue. Virtue makes the end right, and practical wisdom those things which are for the end” (Aristotle VI, 12, 1144a6-9).

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<sup>4</sup> The masculine pronoun is used deliberately in this statement, as it would be a more appropriate choice for Aristotelian discourse.

<sup>5</sup> This position seems to be one of the first to separate emotions and true knowledge (practical wisdom), and to create a binary of reason/feelings, with feelings carrying the negative connotation.

Aristotle's ethical position has been criticized as ethics of expediency (Katz), which can justify an act as long as there is a reasonable and balanced explanation of it. Since Aristotle did not provide any other argument on ethical judgment besides the virtue of a person with practical wisdom, there seems to be little difference for him "between 'practical wisdom' and 'moral virtue,' between expediency and the good, as long as rhetoric serves its end" (Katz 191). Similarly, Hughes criticized Aristotle's view on moral training as a desire for order, for putting everything in a box. Even the irrational, such as emotions, which "will subsequently have a profound effect on [people's] moral judgments" (Hughes 79), could be conditioned and programmed, according to Aristotle. Katz further complicated the desire to rationalize ethical choices:

Aristotle's division of ethics in rhetoric according to audience and function... is appealingly useful but problematic and ultimately limited. For based on that division, and the ethics of expediency..., Aristotle does not seem to consider other ethics, such as honor and justice (or kindness and humility) important in deliberative discourse – at least not for their own sake... For when expediency becomes an end in itself or is coupled with personal or political or corporate or scientific or technological goals that are not also and ultimately rooted in humanitarian concern, as is often the case, ethical problems arise. (199)

Katz's concern seems particularly engaging for future scholarship on rhetoric and ethics, since both Aristotle and Plato are believed to have established the epistemological basis for Western society (Western idea of knowledge as an effort to understand what truth is), and for introducing the idea of a formal justified *structure* for creating one's position.

Quintilian and Cicero continued the tradition of virtue as a teachable, but most importantly, necessary concept for an orator's ethos. In ancient Rome, civil duties were an important part of life, and moral character of an orator was on public display. The expectations became high for those who publicly spoke about political issues, because

“ethical considerations always figured prominently in Roman oratory, and action purely on a rational basis (c.f., Aristotle, MW) was not publicly acceptable” (Kennedy 63).

Cicero connected philosophy and rhetoric in that it became equally important to speak and to think well (Stroeve). He did not try to resolve multiple positions; Cicero’s approach was rather to learn as much as possible and then decide. Thus, he also followed the familiar path: knowledge comes first, followed by moral judgment.

Cicero’s considering of all positions through on-going learning found its pedagogical incarnation in Quintilian’s *The Orator’s Education*. According to Quintilian, the orator was responsible for his/her moral education, through enhancing the character through within; multiple opposite positions were not taken into public anymore (after all, Rome was an empire, not a republic) and individual’s moral character was the core of Quintilian’s pedagogy. This pedagogy demanded that “the orator must be a good man, [and]... *no one* can be an orator *unless* he is a good man” (Quintilian 199). Ethics, however, was still teachable.

Renaissance humanism introduced intellectual ideas that focused more on an individual than universal knowledge (as the grounds were prepared by Cicero and Quintilian). Augustine was among “some humanists [who] read the classics less as sources of timeless truth than as revelation of individual personalities and of their own times” (Bouwsma 35). Augustine’s invention of personal autobiography, and “cosmic, world-historical meditation” (Johnson 230) opened the resource of individuality in rhetoric, which had not been investigated before. However, this individuality did not broaden significantly the understanding of ethics. Although the means of attaining knowledge now included interpretation, this interpretation was reduced to Biblical texts.

If for Cicero and Quintilian right speaking went along with right thinking, for Augustine ethics was provided through faith, and ethical norms could be learned through sacred texts: God is perfect and his creation is orderly.

Following the growing skepticism of late Renaissance, belief in the possibility of human knowledge was questioned. Thus, Bacon insisted on “the limits of all knowledge, seeing the mind as an untrustworthy mirror” (Bouwsma 40). The only knowledge that was worth uncovering became practical knowledge. According to Montaigne, “the true was the useful” (Bouwsma 47). In the context of growing historical scholarship, geographical discoveries, and, later on, scientific inventions of the modern era, ethics ceased to be one of the primary considerations of rhetoric. Utility and search for the method that would explain reality became the focus of philosophers (Descartes, Galileo, Bacon, Locke), while rhetoricians (Campbell, Whately), in a similar fashion, were trying to invent a formal “method” of discourse style, the one that was logical and could be adjusted when necessary. According to Toulmin, ethics was made into “a field for general abstract theory, divorced from concrete problems of moral practice; and, since then, modern philosophers have generally assumed that – like God and Freedom, or Mind and Matter – the Good and the Just conform to timeless and universal principles” (32).

In this situation of a univocal commitment of the modern world “to thinking about nature in a new and ‘scientific’ way, and to use more ‘rational’ methods to deal with the problems of human life and society” (Toulmin 9), Vico voiced a surprisingly unexpected claim that “civilization stops... when we trade the unstable world of human affairs for the deep solitude of certainty” (Covino 58). In terms of acquiring knowledge, Vico argued

against the widely accepted Cartesian method, and the separation of knowledge and language/rhetoric, as essentially limiting.

[S]uch speculative criticism, the main purpose of which is to cleanse its fundamental truths not only of all falsity, but also of the mere suspicion of error, places upon the same plane of falsity not only false thinking, but also those *secondary verities and ideas which are based on probability alone*, and command us to clear our minds of them. Such an approach is distinctly harmful...*Nature and life are full of uncertainty*. (Vico 868-69, emphasis added, MW)

Vico was very diplomatic in his attempts to expand the scientific method and include the richness of language in the process of knowledge-making, to collapse the separation between language and style. He warned of the danger of neglecting human dimensions for the sake of pure truth: “Since, in our time, the only target of our intellectual endeavors is truth, we devote all our efforts to the investigation of physical phenomena, because their nature seems unambiguous; but we fail to inquire into human nature which, because of the freedom of man’s will, is difficult to determine” (Vico 871). Vico also criticized curriculum, where “we pay an excessive amount of attention to the natural sciences and not enough to ethics. Our chief fault is that we disregard that part of ethics which treats of human character, of its dispositions... and of the manner of adjusting these factors to public life and eloquence” (871). Vico clearly connected that part of ethics to rhetoric.

Unfortunately, Vico’s call for inseparability of ethics and rhetoric as essential parts of human knowledge seemed to be a lone cry, until Nietzsche introduced his theory of perspectivism. Nietzsche rejected the possibility of true knowledge and supported the Sophists in the claim that there is no truth (as we imagine it), only opinions (*doxae*), or various individual perceptions (Consigny). This is the only kind of knowledge accessible to human beings and it is created rhetorically and metaphorically through language.



“Truths are illusions...; they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force” (Nietzsche “Truth and Lies” 1174).

Similarly, ethics, as part of reality, is grounded in language; therefore, there is no absolute ethics, just as there is no absolute truth. “There are no moral phenomena at all, but only the moral interpretation of the phenomena” (Nietzsche “Good and Evil” 108). It seems that, for the first time after the Sophists, Nietzsche created an intriguing web of human understandings (or perspectives) of truth/knowledge, ethics, and rhetoric; it reversed the centuries-old Platonic hierarchy that subordinated rhetorical persuasion and language to the supremacy of knowledge and truth. In effect, Nietzsche’s idea of reality as rhetorically constructed and his attempt to re-state the epistemic status of rhetoric (Gilman) symbolized a shift to postmodern thought.

Nietzsche inspired the study of rhetoric’s defining epistemological and ethical role, which many consider to be the focus of current scholarship in human sciences. Gilman refers to Foucault in the claim that “Nietzsche was a central figure in an epistemological transformation that ultimately will shift the attention of the human sciences almost exclusively toward studying discourse and language” (xx). Twentieth century launched an extensive critique of possibility of objective knowledge. In light of this critique, ethics as an abstract and structured concept is replaced by one that is situated, fragmented, and constructed through language (cf., Derrida, Foucault). In fact, postmodern scholars are willing to question the ethics that reflects the accepted and familiar norms: “[t]o describe prevalent behavior does not mean making a moral statement” (Bauman 3). The focus on language and rhetorical constructs of reality challenge the essentialism of modern ethics that is “universal and ‘objectively founded’,”

thus practically impossible (Bauman 10); such ethics contradicts human nature, which can be irrational and ambivalent. A postmodern understanding of ethics does not subordinate it to reason or true knowledge; instead of using ethics as a system of rules to establish control of the situation (*reasonable* behavior), Bauman invites to *perform* morally in the uncertainty of discourse through considering multiple ethical positions, often marginalized (*responsible* behavior).

Postmodern theorists call to mind the Sophists' belief in the power of rhetoric. They challenge the function of ethical norms to be regulatory forces of the society (Whose ethics? Who benefits?), which reminds me of the story Gorgias told Socrates: "Zeus..., fearing the total destruction of our race, sent Hermes to impart to men the qualities of respect for others and a sense of justice, so as to bring *order* into our cities and create a bond of friendship and union" ("Dialogues" 320, emphasis added, MW). Interestingly, according to Gorgias, these qualities should be distributed equally and used for the right judgment and political wisdom; therefore, the Sophists might be the first who fractured politics and power into the ethics/rhetoric relationship. In this respect, postmodern thought is a nod to the Sophists. The difference though is that postmodern scholars do not view rhetoric as a neutral act (as the Sophists believed) but as a political one, since discourse affects the power distribution in society.

Current thought also reveals that the development of Western ethics and rhetoric left out, and/or silenced the voices and ethics not fitting in the dominant historical dispositions. Thus, female voices and other voices from the margins are generally not present in a long line of "dead white male" philosophers and rhetoricians. It is clear that Western ethics has developed as ethics of justice, subverting into hierarchical submission

alternative ethics (e.g., ethics of mercy), quite similar to the construction of other binaries (reason/feelings, true/false)<sup>6</sup>.

Specifically, Foucault uncovered the systems of exclusion and discourse constraints that, through the will to truth, govern and control the production of discourse, including research. This discourse in a Foucauldian sense constructs ethnographic authority and makes it ethically problematic because of its exclusiveness. The concept of ethnographic author excludes research subjects, as the author constructs the reality according to her own vision and interpretations. The subjects' voices might be included in this representation but they are usually given limited or no power. Kincheloe and McLaren explain that Foucault wants us, researchers, study our own discourses and “explore the ways in which [these] discourses are implicated in relations of power and how power and knowledge serve as dialectically reinitiating practices that regulate what is considered reasonable and true” (291).

Most importantly, postmodern and poststructural critique questioned the possibility of objective knowledge: The knowledge we think we produce is, in fact, rhetorically constructed. Derrida, through deconstruction, undermined secure relationship between language and knowledge. He argued that there is no privileged signifier; therefore, our methodology, methods, and, ultimately, objectivity become arbitrary. This theoretical move allowed researchers to focus instead on what interests their research serves, or what its consequences and ethical implications are (cf., White).

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<sup>6</sup> I limit this argument to the Western ethics only, as cultural and historical traditions of other civilizations may have developed different readings of ethics. For instance, in Russian cultural tradition, ethics of mercy may prevail over ethics of justice. However, more substantial research is needed to investigate such claims and I hope that my project will provide an opportunity for comparison.

Current anthropological and intercultural research (Clifford and Marcus) introduced the argument of ethically challenged ethnographic authority and power. Kincheloe and McLaren quote similar critique by Newton and Stacey: “Modernist ethnography, according to these authors, ‘constructed authoritative cultural accounts that served, however inadvertently, not only to establish the authority of the Western ethnographer over native others but also to sustain Western authority over colonial cultures’” (298). Poststructural critique suggests that such ethnographic authority is rhetorically constructed; postmodern qualitative research describes culture as a rhetorical representation as well. Such a position allows us to question the ethics of an ethnographer, and research itself is not viewed as a neutral activity any longer. Traditional qualitative research on different culture(s) has been criticized as essentially limiting and elitist (cf., Foucault), constructed through metanarratives and tropes often originated in Western travel writing (e.g., Pratt’s “arrival story”). Bourdieu’s theory of practice recuperated anthropology by suggesting a “second break” in a research that would assist in addressing the issues of power and authority. “It is not sufficient for anthropology to break with native experience and the native representation of that experience (to make the research possible, MW): it has to make a second break and question the presuppositions inherent in the position of an outside observer” (Bourdieu 2), to address the ethics of the research.

Such a postmodern critique substantially changes the ways we research and write about other culture(s). Descriptive and comparative narratives in intercultural and anthropological research no longer suffice, as the researcher searches for alternative forms and rhetorical strategies to create representation. Thus, Pratt historicizes and

situates the “arrival stories,” Crapanzano does rhetorical analysis, and Rabinow moves past rhetorical analysis and looks at other historical and social conditions to see how rhetorical features work in a historical context. Tyler introduces a more radical approach: To him, postmodern ethnography of a culture is performance, evocation, but not science or politics. He claims that the world is so fragmented that neither science nor politics can represent it (Tyler 123). Instead of representation, Tyler talks about evocation through polyphonic ethnography. He denies postmodern ethnography any claims of totality and possibility of closure. Postmodern ethnography, rather, tries to understand what its discourse *does*, not whether this discourse is true or false. This quest for understanding the *implications* of discourse reflects the postmodern treatment of ethics as well (cf., Bauman). In addition, “Postmodern ethnography often intersects – to varying degrees – with the concerns of postcolonialist researchers” (Kincheloe and McLaren 298), which include the issues of power, representation, and oppression.

The combination of exclusiveness of academic discourse and its hierarchy of ethics (with ethics of justice prevailing) makes feminist researchers particularly sensitive to the issues of cultural misrepresentation and under-representation of the ethnographic subject/the Other. As feminist (and often female) researchers, they experience the effect of exclusion by having some of their selves disciplinary silenced or tabooed, e.g., emotions, and look for ways to deal with the ethical challenges of a research discourse.

Both feminist and non-feminist scholars extensively use qualitative methods and face similar ethical issues. One of these issues is objectifying the Other, or silencing the subaltern (Spivak). Often the relationships between the subject and the researcher are patronizing; in Bourdieu’s words, “[t]he relationship between informant and

anthropologist is somewhat analogous to a pedagogical relationship, in which the *master* must bring to the state of explicitness... the unconscious schemes of his practices” (18, emphasis added, MW). Davidson called this relationship “charity” when translating the Other, and Clifford (“On Ethnographic Authority”), in his critique of ethnographic authority, argued that

ethnographic writing... can at least struggle self-consciously to avoid portraying abstract, a-historical ‘others.’ It is more than ever crucial for different peoples to form complex concrete images of one another, as well as of the relationships of knowledge and power that connect them. But no sovereign scientific method or ethical stance can guarantee the truth of such images. They are constituted – the critique of colonial modes of representation has shown at least this much – in specific historical relations of dominance and dialogue. (119)

Similarly, for Spivak (“Subaltern”), this “orchestrated” project of constituting “the colonial subject as Other” is an exercise in “epistemic violence” (280-281). For instance, in my own research I have already met resistance from my participants to possessing a voice through my representation of them. For them, I was part of “white men saving brown women from brown men” (Spivak, “Subaltern” 297).

Such “epistemic violence” may bring to the surface unexpected reactions and feelings from both the subject and the researcher. These emotions could explain a lot about a researcher’s relationship with the subject; however, they are often left out from research.

When feminists explore the reality of human experiences, especially female experiences, they examine emotions and look for silenced voices, something that has been traditionally suppressed and invalid in ethnographic scholarship (cf., Foucault on discourse constraints). Feminist scholars criticize the feeling versus intellect opposition and claim that this hierarchy, where “emotions are culturally associated with femininity,

‘soft’ scholarship, pollution of truth, and bias” (Boler 109), makes possible the social control of the marginalized, the powerless, and the Other. In my mind, this silencing of emotion makes the Other even more abstract and objectified.

Feminist work on the theorization of emotions and making silenced voices heard also becomes a site of political resistance (Boler). This work turns the personal or private into the public and, ultimately, the political, to challenge the established order and the belief that the values of feeling/intellect, rationality/sentiment, etc. are antagonistic (Gal). The borderline between personal/private and political/public is, in fact, hard to draw since “the ‘personal is political’ in part because private institutions such as families often operate, like the polity, through conflict, power hierarchies, and violence. By the same token, political acts conventionally categorized as public are frequently shaped by sentiment and emotion” (Gal 262). The private/public tension was the initial ethical problem that launched my research. Therefore, I plan to explore this tension and, more importantly, address the feelings involved in the production of my own research.

Similar to the critique of the feeling/intellect and private/public binaries, is feminist approach to ethics. Feminist scholars question the supremacy of reason and justice as the origin of the moral establishment, and suggest that the understanding of ethics needs to be more complex.

Feminist discussions of ethics call for a fundamental change in the way ethics is conceived. Traditional ethics are based on a fixed set of principles determined through rational means to guide one’s approach to all problems. That approach assumes a universal applicability and fails to question beliefs in objectivity and neutrality. It also homogenizes differences in contexts and perspectives and fails to take into account the connection between political and moral questions. (Kirsch and Ritchie 21)

One of the ways to conduct an ethically responsible research is to include the subject in the construction of a more fair representation. Feminist research invites us to actively look for a place in our scholarship from which the Other could speak and, most importantly, be heard. Such a place could include alternative discourses. In her work, Licona calls for a “third space” that would provide such a place where the powerless and under-represented Other can “put language into play by using disruptive discursive strategies that reflect our lived experiences as fragmented, partial, real, and imagined, and always in the process of becoming” (106; cf., Derrida). The voices from the third space get power to confront traditional “scientific” representation and question its authority through experimental, non-conformist texts. Similarly, Fox suggests using a layered account as an alternative discourse for research. Her study includes private discourses and silenced voices of child sexual abuse, and she writes it in a three-column narrative style, in three voices: her own, a sexual abuse survivor, and her offender. By doing so, she “draws the reader into divergent perspectives,” “so that a single perspective is not privileged” (331).

Although it is tempting to focus my research only on the silenced voices of the Russian characters of the memoir and the ethical choices of its author, I would like to take my research at least one step further. As a researcher who supports her discussion of ethics with poststructural theory, critique of intercultural qualitative research, and feminist arguments, I have to turn the table and look at myself, a researcher, and the ethical repercussions of my own project. In fact, some of the current research has already questioned the ethos of a researcher.



Critique of modern, scientific discourse of traditional qualitative research argues that the so-called “objective” representation silences certain experience and results in a skewed ethos of a researcher, which compromises the research itself. According to Harding,

[T]he class, race, culture, and gender assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors of the researcher her/himself must be placed within the frame of the picture that she/he attempts to paint... Introducing this ‘subjective’ element into the analysis in fact increases the objectivity of the research and decreases the ‘objectivism’ which hides this kind of evidence from the public. (9)

As Spivak (“Subaltern”) argues, the researcher’s position is an ideological one, with its interest, desire, and material and political conditions. Even the intentions and desire to let the subaltern speak (cf., Said’s “permission to narrate”) will never be neutral either. Horner praises the ethos of “the Critical Ethnographer,” who “is expected to constantly question her motives, practices, and interpretations to avoid the colonizing discourse of traditional ethnography” (26).

Feminist research investigates the researcher’s motives and interpretations by including personal narratives in the toolbox of qualitative methods. Borland, through a personal narrative study, successfully challenged the traditional ethos of a researcher and asked a question of who owns and controls the text. She invited her participant to comment on her interpretation of the data and realized that her research became constructed from her own experiences, values, and agendas. It was not the story of the participant any more who “felt misrepresented” (73), because the researcher “assumed a likeness of mind where there was in fact difference” (72). Borland argued that this case illustrated how, “as we are forever constructing our own identities through social interactions, we similarly construct our notions of others” (72), and this construction

becomes an ethical challenge. Kirsch and Ritchie warned about the risk of “being blinded by our own culturally determined world views” (8) that may result in objectifying the Other in the same way traditional qualitative research often does.

If we accept the postmodern treatment of reality, power, and truth as rhetorically constructed, we will also agree that a researcher is going to be “discursively multiple” (S. Smith 44). Postmodern ethos, thus, is not universal either but multiple and open for change at any moment of the research (Brooke and Hogg). In our research then, we may need to include our own narratives, to uncover many sides of our ethos, in order to be honest about our interpretations and representations. These narratives will be far from complete though but open for further interpretation and discussion. This approach could help avoid universalistic claims and generalized conclusions.

I will make my project explicitly theory-driven and theory-derived; I will try to recognize my representation of reality or realities through the lens of both personal experience and larger societal (political and cultural) values. In addition, I am persuaded by Horner’s argument about “the crucial role of social material positioning in determining individuals’ perspectives” (19). Horner claims that we fail to be “materialist enough in [our] conception of the work of ethnography” (13). It might be important for my research, then, to include the critical materialist positioning of myself, the author of the memoir, and the subjects; understanding of materiality of my work should add more dimensions to representation and make it more ethical through uncovering the potential silences of the research.

The current moment of postmodern opportunities seems to me to be capable of filling in the gaps in our understanding of ethics, and re-writing the hierarchical binaries

into a web of human understanding, from vertical into horizontal, to make ethical multiplicities possible. I see this task of filling in the gaps as the main function of the theoretical grounds that I just outlined for my dissertation. Additionally, this theoretical framework will allow me to discuss the issue of power that, through our writing, materializes into a bigger context. “Poststructuralism frames power not simply as one aspect of a society, but as the basis of society” (Kincheloe and McLaren 296). Therefore, the discussion of power will be a necessary component of my project.

Deconstruction and poststructural epistemological critique might be viewed as traumatic events for writing in our discipline (LaCapra). Such events push the researcher to work her way through in considering the ethics of representation in her research and the ways its ethics is rhetorically constructed. In the following chapter, I will describe the methodology and methods I use in this dissertation, which, I hope, were able to produce a somewhat therapeutic effect. The reader will not find in this dissertation any totalizing claims about what is true or false, and what is ethical or immoral in non-fiction writing (whether it is a memoir or a qualitative research project). Instead, I will try to see what this writing *does* (cf., Tyler), why it does it, and what the consequences might be.

### Chapter 3. Methodology

“The words of ethnographic writing... cannot be construed as monological, as the authoritative statement about, or interpretation of, an abstracted, textualized reality... Ethnography is invaded by heteroglossia.” (Clifford, “On Ethnographic Authority” 133, 140)

“Inevitably caring, reciprocal, collaborative research will lead to complications, but it may also lead to richer, more rigorously examined results.” (Kirsch and Ritchie 22)

“Perhaps the most important task of all would be to undertake studies in contemporary alternatives to Orientalism, to ask how one can study other cultures and peoples from a libertarian, or a nonrepressive and nonmanipulative, perspective. But then one would have to rethink the whole complex problem of knowledge and power.” (Said 24)

As I argued in the previous chapter, poststructuralist, postmodern and critical ethnography, and cultural studies challenge the ethics of author and researcher, as well as traditional forms of representation. Accordingly, for contemporary research to be more ethical, it needs to become inclusive, multivocal, and reflexive (cf., Horner and Smith). In this chapter, I will discuss how feminist methodology could be helpful in meeting the challenges of poststructuralist, postmodern research. I also will describe my specific research methods.

The literature on feminism and its methods, specifically, ethnographic qualitative research and activist research provides a sound understanding of feminists’ ethical ideals, or the vision that guides feminist research agendas and methodology. These ideals include feminist topics, discourses and goals, and present the following ethical directions:

- Questions that were not normally asked in traditional research, such as gender, race, class, sexual orientation, nationality, etc., are not merely statistical variables any more but the very focus of a research project. Discussion of these questions opens a conversation, which collapses the traditional researcher/subjects

dichotomy. This conversation tries to be a venue that gives voice to the oppressed and marginalized. This voice speaks the knowledge that the research is looking for. As mentioned earlier, Kirsch and Ritchie called for ethnographic research to be used as “praxis” (25). Horner found this quote important and repeated it in his own critique of feminist ethnographies (17).

- The established conventions as pillars of academic discourse have been challenged. Tompkins reflected on her first attempts to resist these conventions and be herself, a female academic, “The reason I feel embarrassed at my own attempts to speak personally in a professional context is that I have been conditioned to feel that way” (169). One of the current manifestations of this resistance is an introduction of research methods and discourses that fit better with the identity and goals of female scholars. They include, for instance, personal narratives and emotions in the academic argument, to construct the reality of female experiences, which have not been present in disciplinary texts unless through “the male gaze.” Narrative, specifically, becomes a powerful “mode of symbolic structuring - ...a material instantiation of ideology. It is an everyday organizational practice that structures ‘lived experience’ in a particular way...” (Mumby, qtd. in Lay 142).
- Feminist scholarship is being built through the ethics of nurturing and initiation of social change through actions (cf., bell hooks, ecofeminism). Feminist resistance – political, cultural, etc. – should result in social change. An exemplary activist research of this kind is presented in Lay’s work on midwives’ resistance to the “dominant cultural message about birth” (138). Moreover, this resistance occurs

through feminist practices: “To resist successfully the dominant discourse about birth, the midwifery discourse community uses birth stories to solicit emotional support after difficult or tragic births” (Lay 146). Similarly, Schroeder talked about new genres that embrace this feminist ideal and mentioned Brodkey’s notion of “*critical ethnographic narratives*, whose purpose is to challenge ‘cultural hegemony’ in order to transform local institutions, including schools” (54, original emphasis). Finally, Stevens discussed Haraway’s contribution, who “prefers to think of knowledge and writing as having the potential to ‘make a difference in the world’” (159).

- The problem of representation and the Other is in the focus of feminist research. As mentioned earlier in the literature review chapter, feminist researchers feel they can better relate to the issues of misrepresentation and under-representation of ethnographic subject, or the Other, since, as females themselves, they personally experience the effect of this problem by having some of their selves disciplinary silenced or tabooed, e.g., emotions.

It is important, however, to identify the research practices that would transfer these ethical directions into scholarship in rhetoric and writing.

No method is inherently feminist. As Harding pointed out in her argument against the idea of an exclusive feminist method, “feminist researchers use just about any and all of the methods... that traditional androcentric researchers have used. Of course, precisely how they carry out these methods of evidence gathering is often strikingly different” (2). Nonetheless, feminist research tends to use qualitative methods over quantitative because qualitative methods are less objectifying and allow to include more nuances. Non-

feminist scholars extensively use qualitative methods, too (cf., Winsor), and, in their research projects, they face the same ethical issues that feminist scholars talk about.

Part of the feminist methodology agenda is to locate a place in our scholarship from which the Other (or the ethnographic subject) could speak and assist in representation and self-representation. For instance, Licona described zines, which “offer third-space subjects a powerful site for self and Other representation without the reductive, phallogocentrism required in dominant representational practices” (109). Any alternative, non-traditional discourse can potentially create a “third space,” a non-intimidating discourse practice that the Other would be comfortable with.

The toolbox of feminist research methods welcomes the approaches that are more personal, emotional, and vulnerable, such as personal narratives. Personal narratives become a “meaning-constructing activity” (Borland 63) and thus sustain the empirical criticism. More importantly, feminist research invites the ethnographic subject to participate in the process of post-fieldwork interpretation and comment on their own narratives by being the first audience and interpreters themselves. In doing so, feminist scholars attempt to balance the relationship of power in the research and question the “model of the scholar as interpretive authority for the culture groups he/she studies” (Borland 64).

Another feminist research discourse, auto-ethnography, allows even more personal experiences in the data collection. When S. Smith assessed the importance of this type of personal knowledge for our understanding of women’s reality, she claimed, “[e]xperience *is* the truth” (37, emphasis added, MW). Autobiographic texts “manifest a specific female consciousness, a mode of knowing, perceiving, and of being in the world”

(S. Smith 37). In fact, such an exploration of oneself, one's own biases, values, and socio-cultural relationships should be invaluable for ethnographies other than the feminist ones as well. In any case, the research results will inevitably be affected by the researcher's multiplicities of understanding and interpretation of the reality.

I mentioned earlier that Fox suggested an alternative to traditional research procedures by using a layered account in her study that includes private discourse and silenced voices of child sexual abuse. In her three-column narrative style, in three voices, Fox used emotions extensively and, through these emotions and very private narratives, a very powerful feminist discourse was created, which provided understanding of the reality of both the victim and the offender. Most importantly, because this discourse was "violent and sickening" (350), and so emotionally loaded, it became a call for an action, to change the reality that allows suffering of the powerless.

Feminist scholars also make the traditional method of interviewing central to their research methodology but they apply this method differently. "Feminist interviews [are] engaged, interactive, and open-ended. [They] strive for intimacy from which long lasting relationship may develop. Feminist interviews are dialogic in that both the researcher and respondent reveal themselves and reflect on these disclosures" (Bloom 17-18). This approach clearly tries to erase or at least minimize the distance between the researcher and the subject(s) that is created by their hierarchical positions in the research situation. The feminist researcher creates maximum involvement with the subjects; at the same time, this involvement produces maximum responsibility the researcher should assume for ethical and political implications of the research project.



Telling the stories of other people through their own voices (cf., Fox) helps, in a way, deal with the issue of representation. The example of Fox's work gives an idea of representation as a political concept that includes action and resistance, and as "a form of voice and expression" (L. Smith 150). L. Smith warned, however, that there is a danger of paternalism in representation, when the researcher's power allows the treatment of subjects as transparent, visible, and, ultimately, subordinate. Bloom claimed that "the act of interpreting is never unproblematic" (7) and suggested that "we... look toward research methodologies and interpretive theories that will help researchers be more thoughtful and critical about our intersubjective research relationships and the ways that we analyze the personal narratives of others" (2). One of the ways of being more thoughtful about representation issues is giving ethnographic subjects an opportunity to participate in the research, and not only through interviews. The feminist researcher not only "[makes] space for [respondents] to narrate their stories as they desire"; she "[focuses] on issues that are important to respondents," not the researcher, and even "[respects] the editorial wishes of the respondents regarding the final product or text" (Bloom 18), something that traditional ethnographic research did not have before.

A few years before Bloom's work, Kirsch and Ritchie were pondering about the same methodological concerns of feminist research. They argued that "it is not enough to claim the personal and locate ourselves in our scholarship," as we risk "being blinded by our own culturally determined world views" (8) and may end up objectifying the Other/ethnographic subject in quite similar ways with the traditional research that is under feminist critique. Just as Bloom, Kirsch and Ritchie proposed "changes in research practices, such as collaborating with participants in the development of research

questions, the interpretation of data at both descriptive and interpretive levels, and the writing of research reports” (8).

Feminist scholarship has done a significant amount of work in terms of its methods and methodologies (Harding) that any other ethically sensitive qualitative researcher doing field work will find appealing and helpful when making difficult decisions about ethics in their research. Critical ethnography (Horner) and critical case study are among possible projects that share feminist ethical concerns. The tendencies of such studies are similar to and expand the feminist ideals that I outlined in the beginning of this chapter. Specifically, using feminist methodology in such projects supports an ethically sensitive research by:

- Making class, nationality, etc. the very focus of the project, instead of merely statistical variables;
- Paying special attention to not objectifying subjects and avoiding essentializing;
- Collapsing the traditional researcher/subject dichotomy and giving voice to the silenced and marginalized;
- Being conscious about the research methods, and political, cultural, and social implications of these methods;
- Challenging the limiting academic conventions and introducing nontraditional discourses; and
- Exhibiting self-reflexivity/self-reflection through the researcher’s role in the particular setting and role in the larger society/societies.

I strongly support the reciprocal, collaborative relationship between feminist research and other recent developments of qualitative ethnographic scholarship. I see in

this relationship a potential for a deeper insight into cultural and political ramifications, and for action as a critical component of these projects. Consequently, I designed my qualitative research so it includes the principles of collaboration, multivocality, and self-reflexiveness (cf., Horner), to address the ethical problems of representation in the Peace Corps memoir. Although my participants are of both sexes and I do not intend to make gender the center of my research, I still believe that approaching my project with feminist awareness of silences and misrepresentations should enrich my study and make it more honest. Let me introduce my participants, and describe data sources and methods of my research.

### **Research Participants and Data Sources**

The participants of my research strategically represent the introduced earlier three layers of the project: 1) the author of the memoir and the characters of the book, 2) the researcher, and 3) disciplinary, economic, and cultural context(s) of the U.S. and Russia. To speak from the first layer, I invited Sharon Dirlam, the author of *Beyond Siberia*, and eight book characters (four were the main characters) to participate in the project. The author and six characters agreed to participate, while two of the main characters refused. In the second layer, I introduced the voice of the researcher – my own. Finally, to create a broader representation in the third layer, I had to refer to what I will explain later, in the data analysis chapters, as experts' opinions. Since the third layer is broad and context-defining, I thought it would be important to have “outsider” voices speaking from those contexts. The experts that provided their input were technically not research participants, since I did not perform systematic interviews and data collection with them; rather, they spoke as official and supposedly neutral (since they are not related personally to the

memoir under discussion) representatives of the contexts I was describing. These experts were an editor of the organization called Peace Corps Writers, who helps aspiring former volunteers finish and publicize their books; the Director of Research Assurances in my university, who approved my research; a professional writer, who published her memoirs and won numerous awards for her writing; and a university professor of journalism.

I would like to provide some background information about my participants, those who relate personally to the memoir, either through writing it, or being featured in it.

**Sharon Dirlam** is a Professional Journalism Fellow (Stanford University). She also received a Bachelor's in Communication from Antioch University, Santa Barbara campus, in 1995. A year later, Sharon earned a Master's Internationalist degree and Master of Arts in Teaching from School for International Training, Brattleboro, Vermont. Before becoming a Peace Corps volunteer in Russia, she worked as a staff writer and city editor for *Santa Barbara News Press*, a staff writer for the *Los Angeles Times*, and a foreign expert for the *China Daily*. Besides being an author of *Beyond Siberia*, Sharon is a free-lance writer and book reviewer, and is published in *A Woman's World* (a travel anthology), *San Diego Magazine*, *Beyond Baroque* magazine, Peace Corps Writers, *The Santa Barbara Independent*, and several other newspapers. I knew Sharon during her visit in Birobidjan as a colleague of mine, but we did not have close relationship.

**Elena Vadimovna Tolstoguzova** and **Pavel Nikolaevich Tolstoguzov** (I will call them in my research **Elena** and **Pavel**) are a married couple, who became two of the main characters in *Beyond Siberia*. Sharon and her husband became friends of their family during their two years in Birobidjan and spent many holidays and weekends together. After they left Birobidjan, Elena visited Sharon in her home in Santa Barbara. Both Elena

and Pavel are brilliant academics, with graduate degrees and established careers of teaching at Birobidjan Pedagogical Institute. Elena has a degree in English Linguistics, and Pavel has a PhD degree in Russian Philology. Although we used to be colleagues, we worked in different departments and did not have close professional or personal connection. Currently, Elena teaches English courses, and Pavel has additional administrative responsibilities: He is a provost.

**Lyudmila Bystrova** (I will call her **Lyuda** in my research) also is a faculty member at Birobidjan Pedagogical Institute. During Sharon's time in Birobidjan, Lyuda worked as a librarian at the English Department, but later she made an impressive career that includes several professional visits to France (she specialized in French for her college degree), and several years of teaching French and chairing the Department of Foreign Languages. Currently, Lyuda holds a position of the Dean of Students. She also has been a good friend of mine for almost twelve years. During Sharon's years in Birobidjan, Lyuda had a very good relationship with Sharon and her husband, and invited them to visit her home on several occasions. However, they were not as close with Sharon as, for instance, Elena and Pavel.

**Denis Kopyl** (I will call him **Denis** in my research) is a former student of Sharon. She and her husband also helped Denis during his preparation for a grant competition, to study in a U.S. university; the situation was described in the memoir. Denis did win the grant and spent a year attending classes in University of South Carolina. Later, he returned to the U.S. and received a Master's in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. As an outstanding graduate, Denis was offered a faculty position in Birobidjan Pedagogical Institute, his alma mater, where he taught English courses for

several years. Currently, he works as a representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Birobidjan. Denis was a student of mine as well, during my years in Birobidjan. We have a friendly, collegial relationship now.

**Irina Lungu** (I will call her **Irina** in my research) is a faculty in Birobidjan Pedagogical Institute. She graduated from the same university as I did, and we started our careers in Birobidjan in the same year and in the same department. During Sharon's visit in Birobidjan, they treated each other as colleagues but did not have a close relationship, as Lyuda, or Elena and Pavel did. We used to be friends with Irina, although currently we only occasionally call or e-mail each other. She still teaches English courses in Birobidjan Pedagogical Institute.

**Vasiliy Nikolaevich Ivchenko** (I will call him **Vasiliy** in my research) was a faculty in Birobidjan Pedagogical Institute during Sharon's visit. Previously, he had built his career in the city administration and teacher training jobs. He was not one of Sharon's close friends, although, on several occasions, they happened to be invited to attend informal gatherings, like home visits with friends. Vasiliy also was one of those who helped with Peace Corps volunteers' training and conventions in the Russian Far East; therefore, he had more professional encounters with Sharon outside of the department than other faculty did. Vasiliy was one of my colleagues as well. He has moved up in his career and currently works as a Dean of Students in a different school, where he also teaches English courses.

Overall, I believe that I managed to assemble a fairly diverse and, at the same time, highly informed and intelligent group of people to participate in my research. They all have graduate degrees, and the Russian participants are either bilingual or very fluent

in English. I also made sure to have participants with varying degrees of closeness with Sharon and myself, as a researcher. I hope this decision has contributed to the objectiveness and inclusiveness of my research, in the sense accepted by traditional academic standards.

This project was approved by Iowa State University's human subjects research committee (IRB committee). The participants were asked to sign an Informed Consent, where they were informed about the purposes, procedures, risks, and benefits of the study. The author of *Beyond Siberia* received an Informed Consent different from the one given to the rest of the participants. In her copy, I did not reveal to her that one of the purposes of my research was to investigate the choices she had made about the ethics of her book production. The reason I did not reveal this information was because I was concerned she would decide to withdraw from the project and avoid discussing those issues. Her voice, however, was crucial for my study, and I needed to keep her as my participant. The IRB committee viewed this decision as a deception, and I was instructed to prepare a debriefing statement that I will be sending Sharon Dirlam once this project is complete. In this statement, I explain to her the act of deception and my motives behind it. Later, in my data analysis, I return to this situation and discuss this decision and its ethics.

The participants also were given a choice to allow their real names to be used in the study write-up or to use a pseudonym instead. All of the participants chose to have their real names to be used in the project<sup>7</sup>. I collected my data for two years. The sources of my data included the text of *Beyond Siberia*, interviews with the participants, multiple

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<sup>7</sup>All of the participants had their real names used by Sharon Dirlam in her memoir as well.

e-mail and phone conversations with the participants, online research, and my own research diary. After collecting the data, I analyzed each text (the book, e-mails, interviews transcripts, etc.) for recurring themes and stories/personal narratives. For instance, the participants would tell the same story as the one described in the memoir, but in different terms or with additional explanation. Or, the participants would discuss the same concepts, such as trust and honesty, the private/public dichotomy, etc. that later became the signposts of my data discussion.

### **Research Methods**

I consciously worked on designing my qualitative research by using principles of collaboration, multivocality, and self-reflexivity (cf., Horner), to address the ethics of the memoir but also the ethics of my research. I have identified at least two major ethical considerations of my project. One is the problem of representation and the Other/the subject/the subaltern. I saw the very obvious ethical issues in the way the memoir's author treated her characters; I also saw not so obvious but equally important ethical issues in the way I was treating the same people in my research. The other problem is representation and the researcher as an ethnographic authority. I felt that my research needed to be open about the ways my own experiences, background, and beliefs shaped my study and my writing about it. As Fine put it, "it is crucial for us to be cognizant of the choices that we make and to share these choices with readers" (368).

Let me explain in more detail how I collected my data and through what methods. I tried to select the methods that would be in accordance with the feminist principles and practice of research discussed earlier, in order to approach my ethical dilemmas in the most responsible way. Specifically, I used unstructured dialogical interviews, personal



narratives and storytelling, creating an alternative discourse (auto-ethnography), and collaboration with the participants, to modify more traditional qualitative methods of interviewing, text analysis, observation or research notes, and, sometimes, participants' feedback.

**Interviews**, as one of the most common methods of qualitative research and feminist research particularly, were my primary method as well. I decided to conduct unstructured, conversational interviews, although some participants asked me to provide a list of questions before the interview itself. In those cases, I outlined several topics that I wanted to discuss with them but tried to avoid drafting specific questions. I hoped that this approach would make conversations less rigid and more open, and allow more freedom for the participants' voices to become heard. I also hoped that our conversations rather than structured formal interviews would somewhat balance out the power hierarchy of the researcher/participant and help the participants see me more as a person they were talking to, not just as an academic researcher working on her dissertation. As a result, I felt that this method allowed the participants to share their stories more freely and to be more open with their emotions. Those stories were important for the research, since both personal narratives (stories) and emotions are considered to be valuable sources of data in feminist practice. All interviews were over the phone, recorded, and later transcribed. The interviews with the Russian participants were done in their native language, Russian. I thought, speaking in their native language would allow them to express their thoughts more freely and focus on what they say, not how correct their language is. Later, I translated the transcripts of the interviews from Russian into English.

I felt that my bilingualism and the fact that Russian is my native language, too, made me qualified for such a translation.

**Text analysis** became another source for stories. I viewed the text of *Beyond Siberia* as Sharon's voice, in addition to her interviews with me. During my analysis of the text, I tried to locate the characters' stories as they had been told by the author, and look for existing gaps and silences in those stories. Many of those gaps and silences became visible after my participants (the book characters) had told me the same stories during our conversations. Then, I created parallel accounts of the same stories as they were told by Sharon through her book, and by other people who participated in and owned those stories, but were not given a chance to tell them in their own words. In Chapter 4, I give the participants this chance; I create parallel storytelling that could be viewed as an example of a multilayered, multivocal discourse. I also analyzed the text of *Beyond Siberia* for presence of "master narrative" tropes (e.g., patronizing and colonizing travel writing; exercising power, objectifying and silencing the Other through language and genre characteristics of memoir writing; using language figures, such as metaphors that are culturally and politically determined, and contribute to creating and sustaining the power inequality in writing, etc.). This analysis has been incorporated in the rest of the data analysis, and I use it to support my argument.

**Auto-ethnography**, as an alternative discourse and an example of feminist research practice, was an important method that helped me create my own presence as a researcher and illustrate my argument that the claim of a researcher's objectivity could and should be challenged. According to Buzzanell, "[a]utoethnographies are personal narratives whereby researchers take on dual identities of academic and personal selves."

Since I almost had become one of the book characters and had an obvious personal involvement with the participants, I decided to use these circumstances as strengths of my argument, not weaknesses. Granted, I did not hold a neutral, “outsider” position in this research, which, for many, may raise valid concerns about my biases as a researcher. However, throughout this project, I argue that a researcher does bring her biases, values, and agendas into her research, especially if it is an ethnographic qualitative research that usually lasts for longer periods of time, when relationships and bonds are inevitably created. Most importantly, I argue, this researcher needs to be self-reflexive and open about her biases and fracture them in the research, to make it more honest and ethical, thus, in my mind, more objective and valid. I saw this self-reflexivity especially crucial for my project, where I make ethics and representation the central foci of my discussion. When I share my data, I once again expose the participants and make their stories public, which can be threatening and uncomfortable. To counter balance this discomfort and minimize my power as the researcher who controls this exposure, I decided that it would be ethical to create a similar exposure for myself and include my personal stories as well. My personal narratives in the auto-ethnographic parts of the project also make me vulnerable and allow my own emotions to surface, which, again, is a common feminist practice. It also is a feminist practice to openly admit that research is done by humans who have emotions and biases that influence their research. Instead of trying to mask emotions by using neutral academic language and thus creating an artificial, but very conventional account of the study, feminist scholars break the conventions in their writing and look for discourses that could give room for the vulnerable human nature of the researcher. In my project, auto-ethnography is used as such unconventional discourse.

To make this discourse visible for the reader and different from the rest of the text, I put excerpts from my auto-ethnography in italics. I hope that by including this discourse I managed to create a space for myself, from where I can talk and demonstrate what I bring with me into this project – my biculturalism, materialism, emotions, agendas, etc.

**Follow-up interviews and feedback** on my drafts helped me foster cooperation with the participants by providing them with an opportunity to read drafts, change them, if necessary, and recognize their voices in the discourse. Once I finished drafting my data analysis chapters, I sent the drafts to all participants, except Sharon. Once again, in this decision I tried to avoid losing her as the research participant. Also, by allowing all the participants but Sharon to see the drafts I challenged the power distribution established by the memoir, and shifted the power in my research towards those who were the characters in the book. As the data will show, Sharon, as an author, decided that her characters were not allowed to see the drafts of the memoir and express their opinions. In my research, I did the opposite, with the hope that my participants would use this power. As a result, two of the participants – Pavel and Denis – offered their feedback (both through follow-up phone conversations and e-mail correspondence), but not re-writing or revising the drafts. Their feedback was, nevertheless, very meaningful, and I included it in the last chapter.

My project once again taught me that, as in any qualitative research, data collection and analysis may not go smoothly or as planned. For instance, in addition to the fact that two of the main characters decided not to participate in the project and thus narrowed the pool of the participants, some of the data happened to become completely lost for the research. It happened when I was recording my hour and a half long interview

with Irina; the interview simply did not get recorded for some technical reason. When I listened to the tape, my voice was on the tape, but not Irina's. As a result, the reader will not see much of Irina's input in the following chapters. I had to refer only to the notes I was taking during the interview and my own memory.

Besides these challenges and unforeseen limitations, the feminist methods themselves may present additional problems that a traditional researcher may probably avoid. For instance, multivocality and collaboration with the subjects are important values for feminist methodology. However, maintaining these values may become problematic in practice (Horner). Kirsch and Ritchie reminded us that not all parties involved in the research will benefit equally (14), which complicates issues of power and colonization. Kirsch and Ritchie further disrupted the seemingly idyllic collaboration between researcher and participants by asking what happens if participants "do not share the researcher's values" (19). Finally, to what extent will collaboration define the final product, given that, "as the writer[s] of the research report, [we] still retain authority by selecting interview quotes, arranging the text, and drawing on supporting theories" (Kirsch and Ritchie, 19)? In other words, it is still the researcher who owns the text and thus has more power. Their suggestion is to continue nurturing of reciprocal relationships in research projects and be open to change and learning (22). Kirsch and Ritchie, together with other feminist scholars, offer questions as guidelines for ethical research: "Who benefits from the research/theories? What are the possible outcomes of the research and the possible consequences for research participants? Whose interests are at stake? How and to what extent will the research change social realities for research participants?"

(20). These issues will further complicate my research and will be referred to in the following three chapters that present the discussion of my data and findings.

#### Chapter 4. “This is my story.” Who gets to tell it?

“*Beyond Siberia* is a very readable book about life in one of the least well known parts of Russia – Birobidzhan, the capital of the Jewish Autonomous Region in Russia’s Far East. Dirlam and her husband worked for two years as Peace Corps volunteers in that remote region, from 1996 to 1998. Written from the notes that the author kept in her journal during that time, this book chronicles her life, work, and travels in an area of Russia seldom visited by people from the West.”  
(Sharon Hudgins, book review)

“Language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else’s... [T]he word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language... but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one’s own.” (Bakhtin 293-294)

**Pavel:** Do you know, by the way, how the title can be translated [into Russian]? *Beyond Siberia*?

**Maria:** “Za Predelami Sibiri” (“Beyond Siberia”)?

**Pavel:** “U Cherta na Kulichikah” (“At Devil’s Far Away”) (laughs)

**Maria:** Actually, yes (laughs).

**Pavel:** Mythologized meaning of “Siberia” is that the farther and worse simply doesn’t exist. But in this case it does – farther and worse than Siberia. And even lower, and underneath, and devil knows where. So, even in the title there is already the meaning... or...

**Maria:** An attitude?

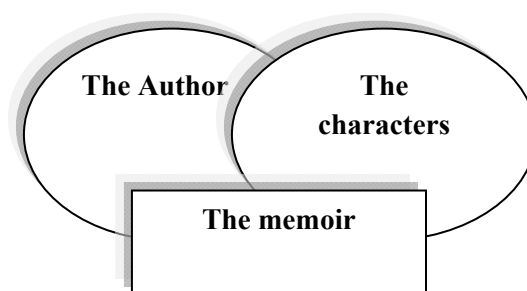
**Pavel:** From the very title there comes this... this negativity, so to say. (from interview with Pavel)

In this chapter I will tell stories. These will be the stories of my life in Birobidzhan during the time Sharon Dirlam lived and worked there, the stories of the Others’ lives, those who were the characters in the book and later become the participants of this research, the stories that found or did not find their way into *Beyond Siberia*, but are necessary to tell. In this chapter I also will trace several themes that will help me continue my discussion in the following chapters.

The stories in this project will supplement the ones told in *Beyond Siberia*. They might also contradict, challenge, and question the stories in the memoir – because they are told in the voices other than Sharon’s. The author of *Beyond Siberia* claims it is a story of her life, and it is. She said she wrote it in the same way she had written other stories when she was a travel writer for the *Los Angeles Times*.

Before I went to the Peace Corps, I was a travel writer; I worked for the *Los Angeles Times* and I got in the habit of taking notes whenever I went on a trip, which is a great way to remember things. So later I would write stories. But in Russia I was just making notes because I wanted to, and I wanted to keep a record of my two years. When I got home and I had all these notes and I realized that maybe there will be a book in it. (from interview with Sharon)

This chapter unfolds the first layer of my research (see Figure 2). In this layer, I add the characters’ (and my participants’) voices to the author’s master narrative that is *Beyond Siberia*. In doing so, I hope to extend and complicate the reality that was pictured through the memoir, and to allow the characters to make their own contribution to the stories about their lives.



**Figure 2.** The first layer of the research

Narrative is a powerful tool for research and knowledge making. As Rudrum argues, true narrative will possess the element of intention and responsiveness. In other words, narrative has a rhetorical force, because it is potent in moving the audience by an intended reaction. Through narrative, the author assigns the roles and negotiates power,



too. It is possible to trace this effect of narratives in specific genres, such as travel memoirs.

In travel memoirs, anthropological writing, and ethnographies, stories may mark the rhetorical moves that construct these discourses. When repeated in similar situations and with similar rhetorical purposes, they become tropes. Think, for example, about the introduction of the characters: there are detailed descriptions of their appearances and first meetings with the author that usually take place within the first few pages. The author, however, usually avoids being described in detail and thus becomes a mystified (and powerful!) figure; the narratives are usually told in the first-person voice.

Another example of a trope is the arrival story. Pratt analyzed several western travel writings over the centuries and found that the arrival story “almost invariably” is described in the first chapters, “where opening narratives commonly recount the writer’s arrival at the field site..., the initial reception by the inhabitants, the slow, agonizing process of learning the language and overcoming rejection, the anguish and loss at leaving” (31). There is the arrival story in *Beyond Siberia* as well:

We settled back into the training routine. Four hours a day of Russian language classes, and another four hours of work and cross-cultural training... The first day John and I took the bus into Ussuriisk, we got off at the wrong place, lost our way and wandered for an hour, through dusty streets and past crumbling buildings... In front of every apartment building, a few old women sat on benches. Their conversations ebbed as we walked by. Some gave us toothless smiles when we said hello to them, others turned away... At the Birobidjan Pedagogical Institute, we would be the first Americans, even the first native speakers of English, many of our students had ever met. (*Beyond Siberia* 16, 17, 27)

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*The English<sup>8</sup> instructor position at the Birobidjan Pedagogical Institute was my first job after I graduated from Khabarovsk State University, in 1995. I was twenty-two, a single mother and a “young teacher” (an official term they used back then for new graduates with teacher diplomas), happy and stupid. When I gladly accepted the job offer and started packing to move to Birobidjan, Nina was seventeen months old and my mom almost had a nervous breakdown: My dad was retiring from military and the whole family was moving to settle down in the opposite side of Russia, six hours time difference from Birobidjan. I decided to stay behind in the Far East. This decision devastated my parents but I knew it was my chance to build my own life.*

The car turned two corners and stopped outside a two-story L-shaped building... We were shown a large apartment, at the end of the hallway... There were no kitchen cupboards. Bubble-gum pink silky cloth draped the walls in the living room from the high ceiling to about four feet from the floor where it met a metallic wainscoting. (*Beyond Siberia* 36-37)

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*I was surprised to find out that the building where the Department of Foreign Languages was located also hosted a few apartments, a so-called “Institute hotel,” for those who came as visiting lecturers or were just good friends with the Institute’s administration. The apartments were on the second floor, and Nina and I spent our first six months in Birobidjan there, waiting for our future apartment to be finished. It was the place where Nina learned how to climb stairs by herself, without me carrying her all the way up. I remember I would get into the apartment and take off my coat and scarf and sit with the door open watching her, as she would still be climbing, so little and so stubborn.*

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<sup>8</sup> As I explained in the “Methodology” chapter, parts of the project that are in italics present sections from my auto-ethnography, a self-reflecting narrative that tells stories about *my* own experience with the memoir and the places, people, and events described in it. It is an emotional and personal disclosure that adds to and complicates my position of the author of this research.

*I realize now how much she was like me then. I refused to follow my parents and stayed in Birobidjan by myself with Nina. We simply did it then, without much thinking, but we learned both – how to live an adult life and how to climb the stairs.*

*The pink cloth draping on the walls was so hilarious that it did not even make me feel embarrassed when I had people over in our place and they would start laughing at it. You just couldn't help it.*

My participants remember very well how Sharon arrived with her husband. They talk freely about the relationships they had with their family and generally have warm memories about those times.

We were friendly with each other. Besides, I liked these people. We often visited each other at home. (from interview with Lyuda)

I know [Sharon] as a very good teacher, who gave me a lot in the sense that she taught me how to write correctly, using English rhetoric, how to write an essay. I remember her as a kind teacher and a very professional one. (from interview with Denis)

We became friends. They seemed to be very friendly, open people, with a good sense of humor and life experience... I never knew any [American] people of this age, and [people of this age] are always interesting. When you learn about people, you learn about the country.... So we became close friends. Sharon always seemed to be a kind person, the one who can see people's imperfections with, I thought, good amount of irony, including her own [flaws]. (from interview with Elena)

We mostly met outside of work. But I was not one of their close friends, and they were not my close friends. We had very kind, friendly relationship. (from interview with Vasiliy)

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*I had a lot of memories about my years in Birobidjan. I was swallowing Dirlam's book, page by page, feeling nostalgic and longing for my lost friendships, late night*

*conversations, everything that was left behind. As I was reading, I did not have to imagine the places described, I knew exactly what they looked like. In my mind, I was in Birobidjan again, walking its streets and participating in its events for the second time in my life.*

We had VERY good relationships: we invited them for picnics, and everything was very nice and warm... You know, how we would go on a picnic, then get together and share memories. And so, all that time their reaction was very positive. For instance, you know how in Russia, when our people have a picnic, like the one we had on May 9<sup>9</sup>, and how our people sing songs there – in the loud and drawling way. And so [Sharon and John] would always say, “It is so interesting here, so good, people sing and it makes them closer to each other. At home, people never sing like you do here.” So they would turn their heads to each group [of singing people] and tried to sing too or just wave their hands. (from interview with Elena)

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*I was smiling when reading the exact descriptions of people, their physical appearances and traits of their characters; these were the people I shared my life with for six years. I was sad, too, realizing only now that what used to be life is now only memories.*

Wait a minute. *As I was drawn so close to the peoples’ stories and lives described in the book, I gradually felt resistant to read on, refusing to learn more about them. “OK, this part is too personal, I don’t want to know why my former boss was not happy in her relationships. I don’t think I have the right to know that.” At that point I skimmed the book quickly, afraid that my name would appear alongside with some very personal information about me and sighed with relief when it did not. Your name cannot be there, I told myself, because you were never asked permission to publish your stories. And given*

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<sup>9</sup> National holiday in Russia, Victory Day, to commemorate the victory of the Soviet Army over the Nazi Germany and the end of World War II.

*the openness in disclosing personal (and sometimes painful) information that I saw in the text, I doubt that I would ever agree to be featured in it.*

*I was astonished, thinking how brave these people were to give their permission for such a public display. DID THEY? It struck me.*

I kept in contact with a couple of friends I left in Birobidjan, and they never mentioned the book in our conversations. I decided to find out if they knew about it.

All phone conversations were made in the course of one night because of the sixteen hours time difference. The conversations are freely translated from Russian and reproduced from the notes taken during the calls. Below are fragments of the conversations.

12:15 a.m.

**Maria:** I am reading a book written by Sharon about her experience in Birobidjan. Do you know about the book?

**Lyuda:** Yeah, I heard about it. She sent copies to a couple of people here but I never paid attention to it. Why would I bother? I am not in the book.

**Maria:** You are.

**Lyuda:** (long pause) What is she writing about me?

**Maria:** Are you saying she never asked for your permission? Did she ask your husband, because he is also...

**Lyuda:** (interrupting) WHAT is she writing about me?

12:35 a.m.

**Elena:** The book is right here, on my shelf. Anyone can read it, I am not hiding anything...

**Maria:** Did you know what the book was going to be about or what kind of information would be disclosed?

**Elena:** (pause, then sigh) No, of course not. When I read it, I felt like she was writing it by looking through a key hole, using our lives that we had opened for her, and picking out the stuff that would be exotic, that would sell to American readers, without thinking how people here would feel about it.

**Maria:** Did she ask your permission to use your real name for the book?

**Elena:** Yes, she did... Of course I said yes. I trusted her. We were friends. They were almost like a part of my family... We feel hurt now... The book's a done deal. What can we do about it?

1:20 a.m.

**Irina:** Yes, I heard about the book and I know she sent a copy to a few people. It made some people really mad. Did you read it? What's in it? Is it that bad?

**Maria:** No, it's just that it's really open about people's personal stuff and uses real names.

**Irina:** Wow. Good thing I'm not in it.

**Maria:** You are.

That was the moment when I understood that I had to do something. I was angry and I have to admit that emotions prompted this project. Intrinsically, I felt that emotions might not be acceptable as valid data for a research project: As researchers, we are trained to avoid emotions and, as my literature review suggested, this view became the premise of the Western philosophy. At that point, I decided to turn to the feminist traditions in theory and practice, which embrace emotions and personal stories as carrying epistemological value. In fact, Tompkins (170) criticized Western epistemology that "is shaped by the belief that emotion should be excluded from the process of attaining knowledge." As my earlier review of the parallel historical development of ethics and knowledge illustrated, this development has been mainly exclusive of the perspectives that did not quite fit in the dominant discourse of those in power, usually white, wealthy, and male.

However, the latest arguments of poststructuralist theory deconstruct the production of knowledge and, as a result the marginalized perspectives are being given a chance to make their contributions. In this respect, the feminist theory and practice not only represent such a perspective, but also supply tools for a researcher who wants to explore non-traditional sources of data, such as emotions and personal stories. Through

such research, these data become public and gain an epistemological weight. “The ‘feminist politics of emotion,’” says Boler, “is a theory and practice that invites women to articulate and publicly name their emotions, and to critically and collectively analyze these emotions not as ‘natural,’ ‘private’ occurrences but rather as reflecting learned hierarchies...” (112).

As my participants were talking to me about their reactions to the book, it became apparent that their evaluative remarks were often emotion-driven, not simple statements of whether they liked or disliked the book. Some of their reactions are similar and some are not. Some are neutral, some are more positive, and some are openly negative. But most of them involve, to various extents, an expression of emotions:

**Pavel:** When I first found out that she was writing a book, I felt... well, I was just curious, that’s it.

...  
[After reading the book] there was a feeling of hurt because we actually had tried to make [Sharon and John’s] life easier here: both psychologically and materially... The payoff was, well, very peculiar. (from interview with Pavel)

**Elena:** After I read the book, I felt seriously insulted, so I decided to stop our relationship... I felt like it was a betrayal, because from my perspective, my soul was so open towards [Sharon and John]... And so I felt hurt because all my inner feelings then and... we live through our emotions anyway... So, my emotions that I experienced at that time [with Sharon] turned out to have been wasted and, later, misinterpreted... I am sincerely sorry that all this... our life, friendship... ended this way... (from interview with Elena)

**Maria:** How can you explain [Elena’s] reaction to the book, which was pretty strong?

**Lyuda:** It’s regret. To me, it’s simply regret that people don’t quite understand [our] existing traditions, and this is because they are looking at them from the outside, not the inside.

...  
**Maria:** If you found out that there was some information in the book about you and it contained misunderstanding or was given in a negative light, what would be your reaction?

**Lyuda:** I would be upset. (from interview with Lyuda)

**Vasiliy:** I wasn't thrilled by [the book], but I did not feel hostile either. I took it... well, as a right of another person to interpret my actions from his [sic] perspective... I have neither claims for Sharon, nor much excitement [about the book], so my position is quite neutral. (from interview with Vasiliy)

**Denis:** I was pleasantly surprised when I found out about the book... By the people's reaction, those here who read the book, I think, did not know about the book being written and about its content. Some facts described in the book are very personal, and people probably did not want to talk about them [publicly]. So, some people were somewhat puzzled, somewhat upset and hurt by what the book revealed. (from interview with Denis)

As I continued my conversations with the participants, I noticed that they exhibited a certain evolution in their assessments of the situation. Once they had simply stated and described their emotions, the participants proceeded with comparison and evaluation of specific parts and stories in the book in the ways that corresponded with or contradicted the real life situations, in the way the participants had experienced those situations.

Below I present a comparative chart that will illustrate how the same stories are told differently by the author and her characters, including myself. Each set of stories is followed by my comments, as I try to explain the differences between the stories themselves and the way people perceived them.

The author	The characters
John added: 'Not to mention the huge amounts of mayonnaise they eat on everything. Russians buy mayonnaise by the four-liter jug. Mayonnaise, he declared, 'is the drug of choice in the Russian Far East.' ( <i>Beyond Siberia</i> 98)	Denis: It was interesting how, for instance, [Sharon] noticed that Russians use mayonnaise with salads. It was unusual for her because in America people use mayonnaise rarely, like with sandwiches... Here people buy it in big jars and use with salads. She was writing that there was much cholesterol in it and how bad it is for your health. But we don't think so (laughs). We just eat as much as we want.



<p>The book is full of scenes of everyday life and differences between life styles and daily habits, many of them quite humorous. Denis once was an exchange student who studied in the University of South Carolina for a year, so he was able to pick up on these differences and the way they were described in the book. In my conversations with Denis, I noticed his tolerance for such differences. Unlike the above quote from the book, Denis talked about these differences as a matter-of-fact, without passing judgments or giving evaluative comments. He has a good sense of humor and I suspect that this sense of humor guided his opinions about some stories in the book.</p>	
<p>Viktor unscrewed a bottle of vodka. By now, glasses had been unpacked and we could sip at a normal pace. But the Russians toasted and immediately tossed down their vodka in one gulp... Moldovan wine was poured. More toasts were made – to friendship, to picnics, to winter, to Russia, and to ‘America, our ally during the Great Patriotic War.’... Viktor demanded that everyone drink more vodka. (<i>Beyond Siberia</i> 92, 95)</p>	<p>Denis: Another example is how parties were described in the book, or picnic, when people would be outdoors, and toasts... When the toasts were raised to one thing, then another thing, to women, to children, to nature, to everything you want, and then you end up drinking a lot. When you don’t want to drink any more, no one will make you in America. But in Russia you almost, like, have to, out of respect for that particular person or for the idea you are drinking to.</p> <p>Maria: Well, it’s part of the culture...</p> <p>Denis: Yes. This is why it was noted in the book, although if it was a Russian writer, he [sic] would never have paid attention to it. In the West, it’s enough to say “no” once and no one would offer you [a drink] again... In Russia, however, as probably in a somewhat eastern culture, an offer should be made three times and a refusal should be repeated three times as well.</p>
<p>Again, Denis, as a very good-natured person himself, who is inclined to make comparisons between cultures, prefers to explain the differences in perception but not to pass any judgment. His comments about the particular parts in the book remain somewhat neutral.</p>	
<p>The exchange rate went from 5,700 rubles for U.S. \$1 to 6,000. (This was months before three zeros were lopped off, and well before the ‘dark Thursday’ of July, 1998, when the ruble all but collapsed.) We decided our money was safer hidden in our room than in a bank that might go</p>	<p>***</p> <p><i>Actually, that day got the name of “black Tuesday” (not Thursday) and it happened in early August, 1998, not July. That day, which received six lines of the author’s attention in one short paragraph, became a catastrophe and changed lives of many</i></p>

<p>bankrupt. (<i>Beyond Siberia</i> 119)</p>	<p><i>Russian people, including me. Over one night, all our income and savings got reduced, I think, six times (and the prices for everything increased at the same rate). I don't remember the exact figure but I remember very well receiving a phone call that day from a friend asking me to go with her and buy some food using all the money we had left, while there was still some food sold that day at the old prices. I was still on my summer vacation and would not get paid for another month and a half, so I was embarrassed to join her with the little money I still had. I went by myself though and spent all I had to buy food. I came home with two pounds of sugar, two pounds of flour, some bread, and a few cans of tuna and minced meat. Nina and I had to last on it until late September, my next salary, which, after that Tuesday, reduced to nothing anyway. I sat down on the couch, still holding the shopping bags, and started crying. Nina was four and she could not understand why I was crying. As I was looking into her face, I made a silent promise that I would never allow her to be hungry. I now think, if not for that day, I wouldn't have had courage to change our lives and move to the U.S.</i></p>
<p>A tremendous explosion shook the earth on Orthodox Easter Sunday... We wondered if there had been an earthquake... It gradually became known that there had been an explosion at the military ammunition depot in Bira, 25 miles northwest of Birobidjan... The residents of Bira, mostly a few military families stationed at the remote outpost, had run screaming from their apartments... Women and children were rounded up and evacuated from Bira because of continuing minor explosions... They were brought to the Vostok Hotel..., where they stayed for several days... Later the television news reported that the incident was a simple</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">***</p> <p><i>Bira was a military base where my dad had served the last few years of his military career, before he retired. This was also the place where I had graduated from high school and where I still had some friends left. I remember the accident very well. I lived in Birobidjan then and we did think first about an earthquake. It sounded terrifying.</i></p> <p><i>After I heard on the news about the evacuees, I went to the Vostok Hotel, to see if my best friend from high school, Tanya, was there with her little daughter. At that</i></p>

<p>accident: A young soldier, guarding the ammunition dump, had carelessly tossed a cigarette onto the grass... That was the story, and that was the end of it. No investigative reporters to ask hard questions. No further public announcements. Just a soldier, smoking. (<i>Beyond Siberia</i> 165-166)</p>	<p><i>time, we still did not know if there had been any victims of the explosion, and I tried not to cry on my way to the hotel, fearing that, if I did not find them there, then something awful had happened to them... I did not find them. But as I refused to leave and started asking people around if anyone had heard anything about them, a nice lady who was the hotel employee, allowed me to look through their guest lists, in case I might still find them there. And there they were; they simply had left home by the time I showed up. That was one of the happy days of my life.</i></p>
<p>When I compare the events as seen through the author's eyes and experienced in my own life, I start understanding the concept of "being a visitor." I will describe later in the project how some participants mentioned Sharon's position of an observer, an outsider, and a guest. I believe that this position could explain many differences in her perception of the reality in Birobidjan. True, she had to live life similar to the others', but at the same time, I believe, for both Sharon and her husband, it was rather an experience and a challenge, not life in its full sense. By experience I mean the existence of the end date, when their two years in Birobidjan are over and they can go home, to warm Santa Barbara; the predictability of the "after-life," when they know exactly that their lives will go back to "normal" and, in fact, they can go back to normal at any moment, if they choose so. Their Birobidjan experience, as Elena said, was "exotic."</p> <p>To me, here lies a difference in the perceptions: for the author this is a temporary experience and she, quite understandably, gives lengthy descriptions of everything that is part of this experience and thus will disappear after she goes back to the U.S.: food, harsh weather, lack of comfortable living conditions, etc. At the same time, she mentions very briefly those moments that happen to be important, even defining for the whole country and its people's lives.</p>	
<p>From the chapter "The Incident at the Bar":</p> <p>They spent the evening drinking with four Russian men. Taking turns, the men paid for each round of drinks... The next morning,... four irate Russian men... claimed the American women owed them money. There were several versions of the problem.</p> <p>Lisa said, 'We didn't do anything wrong. The men were loaded. Why shouldn't they</p>	<p>Maria: Was it different from the way she described it?</p> <p>Vasiliy: Well, not exactly. There was a very unpretty situation there, when I walked in and the girls were there, having fun. Some guys started offering to buy them drinks. I warned them several times by saying, "Be careful, girls. In Russia no one simply buys you a drink. You will be expected to give something in return."</p> <p>They laughed and did not believe me. I was</p>

<p>buy us drinks?’</p> <p>Daphne...: ‘As far as I was concerned, they were like paying for free English lessons.’</p> <p>Vasili Nikolaevich was also in the bar... Lisa’s version: ‘The minute Daphne left..., the bartender suddenly locked the door! Vasili was talking away, in Russian,... but all of a sudden the four Russian creeps threw me on the floor and pinned me down. I’m sure they wanted to rape me... I just don’t know what Vasili said, but whatever he said, that’s when the trouble started...’</p> <p>Vasili’s version...: ‘I think American girls like to drink too much. They wanted to talk to these Russian men, and I told them not to do it... After Daphne left..., two of the drunken Mafia men attacked Lisa. ‘Hey! Ho!’ I shouted. ‘What are you doing?’ And one of the men said, ‘We are getting our money back!’... I persuaded the bartender and the two men to pull the drunken men away from Lisa and let her escape.’</p> <p>Vasili finished his story, then leaned closer and said confidentially: ‘To my mind, they let her go only because she is an American... If a Russian woman walks into a bar and asks men to buy her drinks, she is a prostitute.’ (<i>Beyond Siberia</i> 125-127)</p>	<p>already about to leave but saw that there was going to be a conflict. I stayed and, actually, if not for my interference, who knows what could have happened to those girls. But again, it was presented [in the book] as if I was almost conspiring with [the offenders], something like that. That’s why I was almost shocked [to see this version in the book] and thought, what if I had just left, what would have happened to them? In fact, I almost set myself up and it was a serious risk [to stand up for the girls]. Because of the kind of the crowd that was there... And so I was... somewhat insulted by it...</p> <p>...</p> <p>[Sharon] knew VERY well what happened there, but by presenting the version of those gals as prevalent and putting me in a somewhat defensive position... not that I’m going to get defensive, or explain, or refuse..., she somehow... [made it look] unpretty.</p>
<p>The bar scene is a rare occasion (if not the only one) where the author is actually trying to introduce several versions of the same story and include several voices of the characters<sup>10</sup>. It is apparent, however, that these versions are not actually written by the characters, but rather the author acts as medium and tries to present an unbiased account of the conflict. She does it by using direct speech with quotations marks, thus creating an impression of direct citations, and by leaving the story as is, without further comments or explanations, ending the section with Vasili’s words, “She is a prostitute.”</p> <p>According to Vasiliy, the authenticity of the story still fails. Through his comment, he gives an additional explanation of the motives and risks associated with his behavior, along with the emotions (“shocked,” “insulted”) that he experienced while reading the author’s narrative. This narrative, although it employed techniques of a first-person account, apparently, was still composed from the author’s journal notes. I may suggest</p>	

<sup>10</sup> Cf. “techniques of realistic fiction” (L. Smith), when the author of autobiography inserts dialogues, characters, etc., in order to re-create the reality of the narrative, to construct the “objective representation,” and thus to persuade the reader that the stories told are true. I will return to this argument in Chapter 5.

<p>then that the attempt to create an authentic narrative could have been successful if, in fact, the characters had been given a chance to actually <i>write</i> their versions <i>themselves</i> and provide as much explanation as they felt necessary.</p>	
<p>We drank to friendship, we drank to victory, and we drank to our countries having fought against the common enemy in the Great Patriotic War...John sipped his vodka sparingly, trying to pace himself... But Sasha and Pavel were drinking to get drunk, and so they did... Several times, Lena warned Pavel not to drink too much, but mostly she ignored his shenanigans... Pavel... stirred the fire... and started to rearrange the stones... But the stones were hot, and he burnt the palm of his hand. He yelled and jumped around for a minute..., then went back to his work... I don't know whether the burn was superficial or he was too drunk to notice. At such times, I had trouble remembering that Pavel was a distinguished professor of Russian literature. (<i>Beyond Siberia</i> 176, 178)</p>	<p>Vasiliy: (with sadness) When [Sharon and John] were always invited to all parties... everything was described [in the book] in detail. And now [Pavel Nikolaevich], a Ph.D., is a provost. But in the book he looks like a drunk, an absolutely fallen person. And there is nothing about how clever he is and how knowledgeable he is, but there is a description of how he got drunk, how he started drinking and how [Elena] was trying to snatch his shot glass.</p>
<p>I do agree with many of my participants, including Vasiliy, that some stories might have revealed too much. It is true that such stories, as the one above, was meant to be about friends and for friends only. However, as Vasiliy's comment suggests, those who were friends to the author also had a very public side of their lives. In a sense, the stories about the private life of the characters might have damaged their public persona.</p> <p>In addition, Vasiliy noticed that an attempt to tell stories about the private side of the characters' lives had minimized important and, I would argue, outstanding professional qualities of this character. The lack of balance in the stories told, in descriptions, and evaluations became another important theme addressed by the participants, as I will explain later in the chapter.</p>	
<p>A pair of girls were just as likely as a boy-girl pair to hold hands, whisper together, and lay their heads on each other's shoulders... The students were affectionate with each other... Svetlana, who had always sat alone at the front of the class, had a new friend. Katya. She and Katya, a rather large and dowdy girl, were constantly together. For the first</p>	<p>Elena: Some moments in the book simply surprised me. Because I think it's still somewhat an American point of view; I am already inclined to somehow generalize. Maybe it's the influence of mass media, maybe something else, but here in Russia there still is no such thinking that if two girls are friends or sit at the same desk in class for several years, then immediately</p>

<p>time since I met her, Svetlana looked happy. (<i>Beyond Siberia</i> 89)</p> <p>Lena, Vanya and I went for a walk and picked more wildflowers. Vanya tried throwing stones at the little gray birds who darted among the trees, but his aim was wild and the birds hardly noticed. (<i>Beyond Siberia</i> 179)</p>	<p>they are considered lesbians. That if a child throws rocks into the river, then it means that he [sic] tries to hit a bird. No five-year old child would ever get such an idea... Maybe this could be explained by a desire to scandalize the situation just for making the book more popular...</p>
<p>I may assume that the description of the girls' behavior surprised Elena because, in my opinion, no Russian would pay attention to it or decide to describe it, thus implying that this is an unusual behavior. Consequently, if this is an unusual behavior, it potentially may carry some negative connotation<sup>11</sup>. This impression could have been further intensified by the lack of any explanation or further evaluation from the author's part. That is, the paragraph ends with "Svetlana looked happy," thus leaving room for thought and interpretation.</p> <p>As for the second story, Vanya was Elena's son and it could be quite understandable that, as mother, she was upset to see a description of him supposedly throwing rocks at birds. Elena suggested that the situation had been exaggerated and even far from the reality.</p>	

In this sense, the participants employ their personal experiences, emotion, and viewpoints as valid reasoning that is capable of balancing the "subjective" and "biased" descriptions and evaluations they saw in the book. In fact, this "bias," "negativity," and "misinterpretation" of reality was often the reason for the participants' frustration. Some of the participants referred to the way they had been portrayed in the book:

**Maria:** When people were telling you about the book, how did they say it? What was their reaction to the book?

**Vasiliy:** The reviews were not so good. They said that, although the stories about me are very neutral, they might be not quite true because some behavior described did not resemble me very much, so I might have been described not very objectively. So this was the way for them to warn me. (from interview with Vasiliy)

<sup>11</sup> In Russia it is common for many people to assign a negative value to homosexual behavior.

Some, like Pavel, were able to picture very witty analogies to describe their impressions of the book, once again focusing on the fact that the experiences described in the book often possess a negative connotation: “The book itself is a collection of situations that she experienced. These are such apprehensive reactions, like the one when you are being poked with a needle, and each time it hurts, you go, ‘Ay!’ And so the book is a collection of these Ays, you know? (laughs) Metaphorically speaking...” (from interview with Pavel).

Elena makes an observation that there is a discrepancy in the author’s attitudes and evaluations of reality: The impressions Sharon shared with Elena while she was still in Birobidjan seemed very different, almost opposite to the ones introduced in the book.

The position reflected in the book and the position that we saw [when they lived] here were so much different. It seemed to me that that position has transformed... For instance, in the book there is a description of their encounters with little children at the town square where they went for walks. When children learned that [Sharon and John] were Americans, they showed very much interest. So in my opinion, when [Sharon and John] were telling us about those meetings, everything was quite normal. Yes, children got curious about the foreigners. That’s normal. If they hadn’t been curious, then, I don’t know, they would have been abnormal children. Especially in our country... well, this is not a secret to anyone... that we’d been behind the iron curtain and did not socialize with Americans. So the first Americans appear in Birobidjan... Birobidjan is not a very popular town for visits from foreigners, so of course the children were curious... [The Americans] were like people from a different planet for them. But later, [in the book] all this has transformed into the idea that [these children] were half-savages... and all they wanted was to beg for chewing gum or something else... When [Sharon and John] were here, they never spoke about it in such way... about the children like they had the mentality of Australian aborigines. (from interview with Elena)

It is interesting to note that, in addition to her telling the story, Elena also tries to explain the children’s behavior and make connections to the larger context, e.g., the history of the town and the country as a whole (“Especially in our country... well, this is

not a secret to anyone... that we'd been behind the iron curtain and did not socialize with Americans.”). At the same time, she takes her story to yet another cognitive level – associations. Here, Elena generalizes about the personalities of the children and the Americans, using similes when she calls the Americans “like people from a different planet” and children “like they had the mentality of Australian aborigines,” “half-savages.” Of course, she attributes the similes about children to Sharon’s perception of them, thus, probably unintentionally, reinforcing the tropes of traditional Western colonizing travel writing as described by Pratt.

Elena goes on to explain Sharon and her husband’s point of view, and hypothesizes that “It is quite possible that there was no transformation. Simply, like any polite people, [Sharon and John] might not want to hurt the hosts. It is possible that they had this point of view back then, too. And it just surfaced in the writing” (from interview with Elena). In this comment, Elena suggests that the act of writing the memoir allowed the true attitude to surface. Furthermore, writing, or narrating this particular story, turns out to have a rhetorical implication, although perhaps not the one intended by the author. Elena takes stories like this one and her understanding of them as a direction for future action:

Now, after I have read the book, I will never be so open for any American. Because somewhere deep down, something just shut down in me. Because I realized that my every word, no matter how sincere and friendly it was, could be interpreted in a completely different light but not... the same as my emotions and thoughts that I had at the moment. Although, during that time when I opened for [Sharon], she expressed a similar reaction in return. And this is why [when I read the book], I had a feeling that her reaction back then had been hypocritical. (from interview with Elena)



While Elena talks more about the *perceptive* side of the stories in the book and how they seem different from the author's shared experiences in Russia, her husband Pavel suggests to look at the *prescriptive*, motivational sides of the stories and the Peace Corps as a mission: "If I understand it correctly, people from the Peace Corps are people with a certain mission and this mission should stay in their minds... But honestly, I did not see any of this, no understanding of what you are here for, who these [Russian] people are, no desire to understand this reality, nothing but a search for exotic, the negative one, too" (from interview with Pavel).

Similar to Pavel's ability to talk about the situation in abstract and general terms is Vasiliy's contribution to the conversation that evaluates the stories in the memoir by measuring how balanced the information in the book is: "Well, you can't say that there was no truth [in the book], but...truth was given in certain doses. Something got highlighted that should not be highlighted. Something that [generally] gets balanced by other facts was not balanced [in the book]" (from interview with Vasiliy).

My female participants did not show much attempt to analyze and generalize in their feedback. Instead, their feedback focused on the interpretations of events and, once again, on their emotions associated with these interpretations:

**Elena:** This is exactly what I didn't like: the interpretation only. There were events and some facts described [in the book] but the interpretation of these facts, in my opinion, was absolutely wrong. It was biased. (from interview with Elena)

**Lyuda:** [What I feel is] simply regret that people don't quite understand [our] existing traditions, and this is because they are looking at them from the outside, not the inside. (from interview with Lyuda)

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*“The author’s sharp journalist’s eye unravels the complex culture and bewildering mindset of the Soviet [sic.] Far East to let us share her life among some of the most isolated and resilient people on the planet.” (Geraldine Kennedy, the book review)*

*Does this sound to you like a line from National Geographic? It does to me.*

*The critic’s “sharp eye” fails to care for “little” details – we haven’t been Soviet for at least seventeen years. If you only had asked my people, these “the most isolated and resilient people on the planet,” they would have told you about it.*

*“It appalls us that the West can desire, extract and claim ownership of our ways of knowing, our imagery, the things we create and produce, and then simultaneously reject the people who created and developed those ideas and seek to deny them further opportunities to be creators... It angers us when practices linked to the last century, and the centuries before that, are still employed to deny the validity of indigenous peoples’ claim to existence..., to the right of self-determination...” (L. Smith 1)*

*It appalls me. It angers me.*

Although Elena does not make conclusions or generalizations similar to those by the male participants, she links Sharon’s stories to her impression of another American who visited Birobidjan and worked in their school. She makes it clear that there exists a clear connection between the two in the way that Sharon’s book could have influenced the other American’s view of Russian culture:

I am not talking about Sharon only; I actually disliked more the reviews of our life by another young American who had visited our town. It is likely though that her opinions were based on Sharon’s book too, because the book ALREADY had

prompted those biased reviews. Our young instructors tried to entertain [the young American] and invited her to visit banya<sup>12</sup>... They paid for it, tried to make sure she had a good time: food, cosmetic procedures, conversations, and just the time that they all would spend together. All this was taken with an attitude that everything they did was the sign of Russian idiotism. How can one spend several hours in banya?.. How can one do this and that in banya?.. But maybe this is what the [Russian] culture is. They tried to show you the best of it, in a way. (from interview with Elena)

One of the participants, Denis, who, as I mentioned, had been able to experience living in both cultures for longer periods of time, made an attempt to explain certain views in the book by comparing the two cultures. In doing so, he once again tried to “make peace” without passing judgment.

There was something [in the book] that you could simply laugh at; for instance, the claim that Russians like to drink a lot... It is not quite true that we drink more than people in America. Having a certain experience of socializing in America, I can say that people there drink much, too. Maybe we are just talking about a different drinking culture? In America they drink more wine and beer, and in Russia, well, we drink vodka. But people drink vodka in Russia due to historical circumstances. It's cheap liquor and a traditional one. In America that would be beer and there is a certain drinking culture around beer as well, a way to socialize, etc. You see, all this is contextualized. And of course, if you look at another culture and say, “All of them there drink a lot of beer, they are drunks and will have huge beer bellies soon” or “Russian alcoholics all drink vodka and all they have in their blood is alcohol,” that would not be taken lightly by the ones you are writing about. (from interview with Denis)

However, in the same conversation Denis followed up by evaluating the stories' content – what had been disclosed – and measuring, like Vasiliy did, the balance of the information.

**Maria** (continuing the previous discussion about drinking habits): So, are we talking about stereotypes here?

**Denis:** Well, you can write about [drinking] and I do not believe that [Sharon] distorted anything when, for instance, she was writing about parties. There might simply be TOO MUCH accent placed on this. I don't know, these might be the things that some people don't want others to know about. People might have

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<sup>12</sup> Traditional Russian sauna, usually a several hours experience, complete with massage, cosmetic procedures, hot tea, and appetizers.

parties at home or outdoors, but don't make it *public* information. (from interview with Denis, emphasis added, MW)

The end of Denis' comment echoed my own discomfort that I felt reading the book. There is some personal information about the characters revealed in the memoir, along with the characters' real names. I was surprised to see such information published but I was not surprised to hear about people's reactions.

**Maria:** So, as I understand, some people did not expect that this [material] would be published and were not prepared to see it there?

**Denis:** Not just unprepared, but I think even if they had known about it, they would not have agreed to have [these facts] published.

**Maria:** Because it was very personal?

**Denis:** It is VERY personal.

...

**Denis:** Some things, of course, repelled a certain part of the audience.

**Maria:** These were, as you said, some personal facts...

**Denis:** Yes, personal facts and details. (from interview with Denis)

As we try to understand why such a disclosure of personal information became possible, it is important to remember that the distinction between public and private (personal) is not new to the discussions about writing, especially writing in the feminist traditions that challenge this distinction as essentially antagonistic. In this very work, I have been using emotions as part of the data, thus transferring the personal – emotions – into the public sphere – research. As Gal argues, this distinction is also an ideological and cultural one, and, therefore, I suppose an act of transferring the private into the public may have ideological and cultural premises and consequences. The way we label information as public or private will depend on the context: cultural and ideological, and this context may vary, especially in cross-cultural communication.

Since much of the public/private dichotomy is constructed and negotiated through language and communication, Gal suggests that this dichotomy also is a discursive

phenomenon that “can be used to characterize, categorize, organize, and contrast virtually any kind of social fact: spaces, institutions, bodies, groups, activities, interactions, relations” (264). It is apparent that, when the characters were interacting with the author during her life in Russia, they gradually built the dichotomy, where the author was given more access to the private, as a sign that she was welcomed to the same cultural and ideological group. The participants often use variations of the word “friends” when they describe their relationship: “We were friendly with each other.” (Lyuda); “We became friends. They seemed to be very friendly.” (Elena); “We had very kind, friendly relationship” (Vasiliy). These comments presume a certain level of intimacy shared by the author and the characters, because in Russian culture, fewer acquaintances will be considered friends as compared to U.S. culture, and a group of friends usually composes a much tighter, smaller, and more intimate circle.

I may suggest that the author felt ready to include the readers of her book in this group and treat them with the same level of intimacy by sharing some private moments and conversations she had with the characters:

Her voice was shaky, and I tried to comfort her, but Vera said firmly, ‘I am crying because I am embarrassed, not because I care.’

‘I don’t think Lisa realizes what’s wrong,’ I ventured.

‘I don’t mind if she knows or not,’ Vera replied. We were quiet for awhile, then she said, ‘Lisa drinks because she is looking for happiness.’ (*Beyond Siberia* 137)

The characters, however, felt vulnerable and exposed by such a disclosure. They draw a clear line between the private and the public<sup>13</sup> and feel upset that their intimate

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<sup>13</sup> Gal refers to some categories in the social word that reflect the dichotomy similar to the public/private one. Examples are left/right in contemporary politics, modernity/tradition, etc. (269). It is interesting to note that she includes a cultural dichotomy in this list – “East/West (in the cold war cultural sense)” (269). The question is: If we accept this dichotomy as true, then did it end with the end of the cold war? Or, could it be reduced to a certain historic period only?

circle of friendship was not honored by the author. The distinction that they make between the private and the public is so clear and rigid, that they see a violation of ethical norms in the author's writing:

**Pavel:** [Sharon] was very tactless, in my opinion, when she disclosed the content of those conversations that were not meant for others' ears. (from interview with Pavel)

**Vasiliy:** The Russians are open people, much more open than the Americans. And then, after confiding in her, they found out that everything that they had told her so sincerely became public, it really hurt. It's the same as describing a divorce and what spouses tell about each other's bedroom habits. (from interview with Vasiliy)

To help the reader understand the situations that prompted the discussion of ethics by the participants, I give below another excerpt from the memoir that I thought could be an example of the information disclosed. I will follow with Sharon's explanation of some expectations of a Peace Corps writer and a character's comments.

[A]fter Vera rehired Vasili Ivchenko, Lena expected to be rehired as well. John, Vera and I were in our apartment, talking, at the end of the day after classes. 'I turned her down,' Vera said, her foot tapping. 'Why?' I said, stunned. 'Her knowledge isn't very good,' Vera said... Instead of letting Lena return, Vera hired... three new graduates: Katya Valentinovna, and two Natashas... [T]he fact was, Lena had been gravely insulted. Could it be that she really wasn't qualified to teach in our department, by some high standard Vera wanted to set? Or was it that Vera found it easier to dominate and control the new graduates?.. We could only speculate that friendship was not as important to Vera as power. At least this friendship wasn't. (*Beyond Siberia* 268-269)

On a short note, I believe that such information is generally considered confidential in the U.S. workplace. Plus, both Vera and Lena received copies of the book from Sharon, where they could read about each other. All the names in this excerpt are real, including the names of the new hires.

It is possible to suggest that Sharon was trying to focus most of her writing on the interpersonal relationships and stories only because of the certain expectations set by the Peace Corps in terms of what should definitely be avoided in writing: “[The Peace Corps] ask their volunteers not to write anything political during the time that they are in the country; they ask them not to embarrass the Peace Corps and they ask them to remember that they are representing America and not to be critical, you know, those kinds of things” (from interview with Sharon). Nevertheless, the characters saw the writing as unethical, and they expressed their opinion in a very direct way:

Now I am talking about something that, among humans, simply is called ethics. And ethics has been violated in this case. If you are a representative of a civilized society, as you imagine yourself or think so about yourself, then have some simple human ethics, alright? Don’t make people butt heads, don’t spread gossip, and don’t write books about something that someone told you without any intention to let others know about it. Because now these people got their books and it’s interesting now with what eyes they are going to look at each other. (from interview with Pavel)

Naturally, I was curious to find out why the characters who knew they would be in the book gave permission to use their real names in the book. It turned out that they, once again, viewed the author as one who was part of their intimate circle of friends, and trusted her not to disclose the information that belonged to that circle only:

**Maria:** So, it was built on trust?

**Pavel:** Well, yes. Do you know why I am using the word “insensitivity”? I mean, there are things that are simply not supposed to become public. It is equally indecent as disclosing your opinion about someone, which was confessed to you only. That’s it. In other words, I am talking about very common things here; names are not the real issue. (from interview with Pavel)

Therefore, the issue was not the names per se, but the kind of information that became transferred from the private into the public. As I found out, this served as a lesson to many characters and, as a result some refused to participate in my research, including

Vera. Although they discussed the memoir with me during our long telephone conversations, they did not clearly explain their refusal. Some of those who did agree to participate tried to explain it to me the way they saw it and, again, the idea of breach of trust surfaced:

**Maria:** Some people refused to participate... We had long phone conversations... They have a lot of emotions and they shared them on the phone, in private conversation. However, when they were given an opportunity to participate in the research and put some thoughts in the academic context and discuss them, they refused. Why do you think people don't want to do it?

**Denis:** The thing is they have some experience. How does this person know that what they say and you record won't be used in a different meaning?

**Maria:** Well, I promised that they will see drafts and I won't publish without their consent.

**Denis:** Well, the seed of distrust has been planted and, even if you promise a million, the people still won't do it. The people may not trust you or not want to be public. In other words, the people do not want their words to be in public, or recorded. How can they trust you that you will send them [the drafts]? (from interview with Denis)

I noticed that my participants often used emotionally charged words, such as "trust," "being honest," "being open," and "soul."

**Maria:** [If you found out that the information about you had been misinterpreted and given in a negative light], would you have a similar reaction to the one of Elena's?

**Lyuda:** I think, yes. Yes. Because when you get close with a person, invite her to visit your home, introduce her to your family, this is already informal communication, communication between your two souls. This is the type of communication when you allow this person into your inner private world... And once you allow this person in, you also put your trust in her. And if she breaks this trust, it's always a betrayal.

...

**Maria:** In other words, even if you had not been told WHAT she wrote or included in the book, you would have just trusted her?

**Lyuda:** I would have trusted her. (from interview with Lyuda)

**Elena:** My soul is somewhat still open for John. And for Sharon it has shut. That's it.

...



What can I tell [Sharon]? My best regards... Although I am afraid that there is no more soul left in my regards. (from interview with Elena)

It seemed to be common for the characters to associate friendship with such notions as trust, openness, and spirituality. For them, these were the values supposedly shared by all those who are in the intimate circle of friends. They also suggested that the same values should be uphold when the person functions outside of the circle, through actions and communications with other people, e.g., through writing. In this case, the characters see the value of openness as paramount (cf., Vasiliy's words about openness of the Russian people) and leading to another ethical dimension – honesty.

**Lyuda:** That's why I believe that, first of all, you need to be an honest person and if you plan to write a book, tell about it honestly. And then – it's up to that person, how he [sic.] considers [it] appropriate to behave. (from interview with Lyuda)

**Maria:** I found out that some people did not know that they were in the book and their names were used. These people were unpleasantly surprised. What do you think about it?

**Denis:** Well, I think of course that it is necessary to let those people you write about know that, so that you be honest with them. (from interview with Denis)

As I continued my conversations with the participants, I asked them to suggest possible ways to eliminate or at least to reduce the bias and misinterpretation that they saw in the stories. We also discussed how to negotiate the private/public dichotomy in the memoir writing, in order to write in an ethically responsible way. It was interesting to note that, in their suggestions, the characters were using the same values of spirituality, openness of one's soul, and trust as guiding principles for making ethical decisions in writing.

**Denis:** I think it would be good for people to read it first. It would be very good if you get informed. These were private conversations after all, and the information you trust this person with, your friend, is personal and innermost, and when you share it, you hope it will stay with this person only. And, I think, if this is personal

information, then you need to let the person read about it first, before publishing, or at least ask a permission to publish it... It would be the right thing to do. Because there are some things that you might even disagree with: when the author interprets your words in a certain way but, in fact, she misunderstood you. These are also important moments, and when you see it written, you should be able to correct the author and explain that it was not exactly what you meant. (from interview with Denis)

**Elena:** This is only my opinion, but the person needs to look at the events with an open soul. I somewhat romanticize the situation, but I mean that, if you come to a different monastery, you cannot enter it with your own rules<sup>14</sup>. You need to see first what [the rules] are in this monastery. And try, if you have decided to come here and live here for some time, try to learn how to love this country and to see in these people that you meet not their bad qualities, which may not exist there, but good ones instead. (from interview with Elena)

It is clear that, through our conversations, the participants demonstrated certain cognitive evolution of their assessments of the book: from telling stories and describing emotions to comparing viewpoints and suggesting hypotheses, and, finally, to providing analyses and offering generalizations. Through this evolution, several themes emerged that I would like to continue discussing in the following chapters, along with questions that could be asked in my data analysis:

- **Assigning roles and negotiating power through memoir writing.** What allows the author to hold the power? What responsibilities come with this power? What are the ethical implications of the author's power? Is it possible to negotiate this power and thus make writing more ethical?
- **Misinterpretation and misrepresentation.** How does the author's position of an outsider contribute to misrepresentation? How do cultural differences affect

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<sup>14</sup> An allusion to a Russian proverb, "Don't enter a monastery with your own rules," which could be analogues to the English one, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do."

memoir writing and its perception, including perception of the public/private dichotomy?

## Chapter 5. "Who are you?" The problem of the author, ethnographic subject, the Other, the subaltern

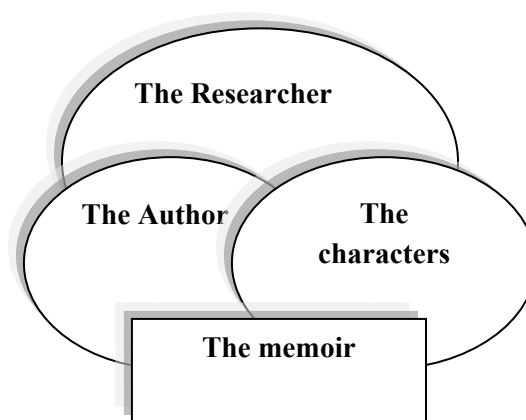
"I thought they might be proud that, as they say, you know, to put them on the map. Here is a group of people; I liked them SO much, in so many ways. And I had a lot of growing that I did over there because I was with these people. And I thought that, in a sense, it was an honor to them to pay that much attention to them to write a book about them, you know, that I found this group of people that interesting that I [decided] to stay with them and write about them and have them be the characters that would live on forever. And you might say... some people might think that was wonderful but not... apparently, not this group of people." (from interview with Sharon)

"One will agree of course that we all are different people and make our own conclusions. But the only remedy... I think is to respect the culture of the country that you visit and of the people that you communicate with, and try to see not only negative sides and characteristics. You shouldn't of course close your eyes to all the negative, but also don't generalize to the extent when everything around you becomes unreal and wrong, *as if only you know the truth*." (from interview with Elena, emphasis added, MW)

"'Truth' to what? To facticity? To experience? To self? To history? To community? Truth to the said, to the unsaid, to other fictions (of man, or woman, of American, of black, etc.), to the genre? And truth for what and for whom? For the autobiographer? The reader? Society? At a time in the West when the autobiographical seems to surround us and yet when the autobiographical and novelistic seem to have merged inextricably with one another, what does it mean to ask about the perplexed relationship of the autobiographical to 'truthtelling'?" (S. Smith 36-7)

As my research continued, I started asking myself why this situation with the memoir became possible. Can anyone just go someplace, come back, write a memoir, and say, "Well, this is my story," although there are so many stories of the others that contribute to it? Do we see this writing as ethical, as long as the stories told present truth? Then what do we call truth and who gets to decide what is true and what is not? And what are the implications of such writing? These questions about power, representation, and ethics in writing are the focus of this chapter.

During my data collection, I realized that, because of my personal involvement, I influence all stages of the research: its design, the data analysis, and conclusions. Even the process of data collection that may be considered by many as an almost mechanical, indifferent and unbiased procedure, has been impacted by my close connection with the participants and the story. This personal involvement is accepted and celebrated in the feminist traditions of research, and I decided to put myself under the research “microscope” as well. I believe that my own position has impacted both the research and its outcomes, and thus I have added another layer (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** The second layer of the research

As a researcher, I became the link that connected the book, its author, and the characters in one conversation about writing, power, responsibility, representation, and ethics. I initiated the conversation, mediated the interviews, analyzed the data, and put together a draft. I did it through my own perceptions, understanding, emotions, influences, and biases; I believe this impact needs to be recognized and discussed in this research.

It became apparent through my conversations with the participants that they do not feel enthusiastic about discussing the book, and some feel even pessimistic about any possibility to bring any change.

**Pavel:** Honestly, I have almost forgotten about the book. And the book did not have any serious impact on my life personally. It's a rhetorical fact and it's in the past... Being the author is a very definite position, and I doubt it is possible to explain to the author what is not right [about the book]. (from interview with Pavel)

**Elena:** At first, I wanted to write [them]. But later... I thought, well, I don't think [Sharon] will be able to change her point of view just because I disagree with this point of view. (from interview with Elena)

Additionally, those who refused to participate in my project often motivated their refusal by disbelief in any potential outcomes of our conversations. They supported my initiative but preferred to keep our conversations out of the project. As Denis suggested, they might not trust me, and thus they say, "This is just my opinion," presuming that I do not have their permission to share this opinion on the pages of my research. They have learned their lesson.

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*What could I possibly do? The book is published and is getting glorious reviews. The author is proud.*

*And the people involved in it do not seem to mind any more: It's a done deal, right? They have strong feelings but "It's only my personal opinion," they say, "It doesn't change things." I think that was exactly the point when I got angry. Yes, it is your personal opinion, just as everything else in the book: the way you live your life, make decisions, share your pain, love, hatred, and build friendships. So, who gets to decide what parts of your Private could be displayed in Public? You do, right? Yet, you are only*

*given a chance (or not even that; it depends on whether you're the author's friend or just the draft material) to see the final product, the one that I bought through amazon.com for \$14.99 (plus shipping and handling). And the opinion you have now is pretty much worthless: Nobody is selling or paying for it online, and there is no way it's going to make an official review of the book: It's your life being sold on amazon.com.*

*Even in the most fortunate situation – you are friends with the author, you have the book and the Internet connection, you are well-educated and articulate – it's unlikely that you participate in common Western practices of writing and publishing open responses to publications. You may speak English fluently and write in this language better than all of my students taken together, with deep thoughts and vivid vocabulary, but you do not speak the Language. The language of Western Writer, the language of power. So you just say, "Oh well," and go on with your life.*

As a researcher, I found myself in a unique position of belonging to both “camps”: As one of the Russians who lived in Birobidjan and was part of the stories described by Sharon, I understand the characters' feeling of being used and betrayed; as a soon-to-be-graduate with a PhD from a U.S. university, who has published, I understand and share with the author the “toolbox” of a Western discourse, with its paramount value of truth and objectivity. This is the value that has become the one defining Western ethics as well: One is allowed to write almost anything, as long as the information is true.

Such a position, I believe, allows me to represent both sides in my research. In fact, Elena pointed out this position as the one, in her opinion, that is “detached” and contributes to objectivity: “Sometimes, I should say, a detached position could be

useful... because it is more objective. Moreover, if you can see both sides, after have lived here and [in the U.S.] for a while and being a representative of one culture but completely immersing into another culture, you have the right to be objective” (from interview with Elena). “Objectivity” and “truth” seem to be equally important for the author and her characters:

**Sharon:** In the American way of doing things you think that if you think something is true and it's not scandalous, then it's not a bad thing to do... if [the characters] said it or they did it, and it was true, then I felt that that was [good] enough.

...

[M]y intention was to honor the experience and the people in it. So that was what I wanted to do. Not by saying everything is wonderful and sweet and perfect but by being honest and trying to give another person just a glimpse into this part of my life and the people that were in it. (from interview with Sharon)

**Denis:** Well, there is nothing criminal in this. She is not distorting any facts, though. (from interview with Denis)

**Pavel:** All that she writes about our picnics outdoors and all that, and her surprise about how much I drink, in her opinion... John, by the way, was never behind me in this respect and sometimes even ahead of me. Oh well... I would not want to focus on this but since we talk about objectivity... (from interview with Pavel)

**Vasiliy:** It seemed to me that most people were presented quite objectively. But, knowing all nuances about myself, I found some inaccuracies. And therefore I had a double feeling: in some places [the writing] was positive, in some places it was not very objective, and in some places it was openly not true.

...

**Maria:** If you were presented in the book in a less neutral light, would your reaction be different?

**Vasiliy:** Well, I don't think that would be very objective then. In the places where she wrote about me with more details, the objectivism disappeared. The objectivism was preserved only in the places where I was mentioned only briefly.

...

Objectivity in memoirs, in my opinion, is not in evaluating events but in giving facts... You don't need permission when you just give facts. It happened, it took place, other people saw it, whatever. But evaluation is a subjective concept. And considering yourself right in this situation is not correct. (from interview with Vasiliy)



The memoir author's position seems to stem from the expressivist perspective (cf., Peter Elbow, Donald Stewart, etc.). In this perspective, the author is the ultimate power figure that sees her own personal experience as defining and sufficient for "an authentic personal voice" (Gere 204). As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the author of the memoir becomes the main character speaking through the first-person master narrative.

As Myerhoff explained, authors in such narratives become "heroes in [their] own dramas... self-aware, conscious of [their] consciousness. At once actor and audience, [they] may watch [themselves] and enjoy knowing what [they] know" (qtd. in Gere 210). Vasiliy made a similar observation when he tried to summarize his impressions of the memoir: "After I read the book twice, I see it as narcissism: Oh, I am so brave, I was in such difficult situation, I had to deal with people who might be difficult to communicate with. In other words, I lived in such conditions, I am such a hero."

By taking the position of an author Sharon, as any writer, accessed power, and this power established the political inequality of the memoir: The author writes not only her own story, but the stories of the Other, the characters. She approaches all these stories from the power position and solely makes decisions about what will be included in the book and what will be left out, thus rhetorically constructing her narrative. As any author in such a position, she performs the act of violence towards the Other (she has the right to tell the Other's story and she tells it, whether the Other likes it or not), maybe necessary violence in this case, as her characters and my participants feel.

**Lyuda:** Well, this position is clear. It's the author's position.

...

**Maria:** If given an opportunity, would you like to read the draft and express your opinion?

**Lyuda:** I would only be very glad... Although I understand that to interfere in the author's style is not acceptable for those who are in the book... Co-authoring bears too much responsibility. It could change the whole atmosphere of the book, its emotional canvas and character. (from interview with Lyuda)

**Pavel:** Of course, [John] knew about Sharon's book. He did not seem to approve all that was in it, but he was not the author, so... (from interview with Pavel)

**Elena:** I don't think [Sharon] will be able to change her point of view just because I disagree with this point of view. (from interview with Elena)

However, some of the participants go on and suggest a critique of the author's position of power. While Vasiliy admits that "we know many examples when one writes a memoir and doesn't ask for permission," he also argues that "if you give an evaluation, then ask the opinion of those who you evaluate: whether they agree or not. And if I disagree, then include my opinion, too" (from interview with Vasiliy). Pavel extends this criticism and also looks at the problem of the genre and what can be acceptable by the genre:

Wait a second, if we talk about fiction, no problems, the author has all the power. This is your world, your reality that you are building. But we are not talking about fiction here. We are talking about life, and this life is being documented. True, these are your experiences and impressions, but there is a borderline between your impressions of others' lives and possible intrusion in other's lives... What Sharon did is called intruding in the personal lives of others. (from interview with Pavel)

The participants realize that they do not have the power to change the author's decisions about her writing. They also are frustrated by this lack of power and voice. Are there any means to give them the voice?

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*My husband listens to my endless monologues about the memoir and finally suggests I should call and talk to his brother who is a writer and is "interested in this*

*kind of stuff because he has to go through similar ethical dilemmas when he writes his stories.” Mike also listens to me and exclaims, “Cool! You’re starting an academic fight!” “Oh, crap...” I sigh. I can’t do that. I don’t want to. I do not share Mike’s enthusiasm about the whole “fight” concept. I am telling him that the reason I am talking to him about it in the first place is just this – I have to TALK about it. My belief is that talking about problems, conversing with people, sharing opinions is the way to go. Fighting always ends up with a binary opposition: the winner and the loser. I don’t want to be either one, and I don’t want Sharon to be either one. I guess that at that moment I figured what I wanted to do with the situation: I wanted a dialogue in Bakhtinian sense that would include multiple voices instead of a common Western dialogical discourse of exchanging utterances and waiting for your turn to take the floor.*

*But I do see where Mike is coming from. I do see a battle field here. “Ethnographic work has indeed been enmeshed in a world of enduring and changing power inequalities, and it continues to be implicated. It enacts power relations. But its function within these relations is complex, often ambivalent, potentially counter-hegemonic” (Clifford “Introduction” 9). My auto-ethnography will challenge the hegemonic power of the observer who emerges from the traditions of western anthropology, “with automatic authority for others defined as unable to speak for themselves” (Clifford “Introduction” 10) and as subalterns blessed by the opportunity for representation. Mike sees the situation as an opportunity to shake the West’s confidence and arrogance, the way it talks and teaches about, i.e. represents, the Other. And I probably will. But not through a fight.*

My conversations with the author and the characters gave me an impression that they all were discussing similar issues but they were discussing them with me, not between each other. Therefore, these issues remained unresolved. It would not be possible to have the author and the characters physically gather in the same room and have a conversation; for each party then, there are still things they need to hear and work through. I see those things as gaps and silences in the memoir. In order to fill in those gaps and silences, I decided to create a virtual conversation the characters, the author, and I could have had, if they had the desire and were given an opportunity to gather and talk.

\*\*\*

*I see a hard task in front of me. I realize I am in the position of the “indigenous ethnographer,” one of the kind, one of the “insiders studying their own cultures” who can “offer new angles of vision and depths of understanding. Their accounts are empowered and restricted in unique ways” (Clifford “Introduction” 9). I am part of the system I study and I am intimidated by both empowerment and restrictions of my position.*

*It’s a double game: My involvement gives me all means to be fair and represent silenced voices of my people, and to be biased at the same time. My knowledge and “nativeness” add to my credibility and objectiveness but at the same time they create belonging that can clearly align me with the Other’s side of the discussion.*

In my attempt to create this virtual conversation, I relied on Fox’s experience; she talked about the method of layered account, when “the reader moves among the voices in a weaving pattern so that a single perspective is not privileged” (331). This is the kind of

conversation that Bakhtin would probably imagine as a dialogue, in which “when the listener perceives and understands the meaning... of speech, he simultaneously takes an active, responsive attitude toward it,” and when “any utterance is a link in a very complexly organized chain of other utterances” (1232, 33, in Bizzell and Herzberg).

Below is an imaginative dialogue between the characters, the author, and me that I composed using the words from our conversations and my own judgment about how such a conversation could go.

**Maria:** Did you use real names throughout the book?

**Sharon:** Mostly real names because it is a true book and I wanted people to understand that... And my friends that I felt might not be too happy with my book, I did get their permission to use their real names.

**Pavel:** We gave permission to use our names because the book is non-fiction, without seeing any danger in it.

**Maria:** Did you know any details about the book?

**Pavel:** No, no. Only the general information, that this book is about her impressions about Russia, Birobidjan, us, etc.

**Sharon:** Sometimes they don't know exactly what I was going to say. And they might say, “Sure, use my real name” but when they read what I wrote, they might be upset with me. They might not like my exposing them...

**Maria:** So, you knew about Sharon writing a book.

**Pavel:** Well, officially it looks ok. But what do you mean by “people knew”? These people didn't know WHAT was written about. If, supposedly, [Sharon] said, “Do I have your consent, Pavel Nikolaevich, to disclose in my book an opinion about a given person, which you expressed on given date, while the book will be available for both you and that given person?” I would have thought twice, to be honest...

**Maria:** And she used real names.

**Lyuda:** Yes, the names were real.

**Maria:** Do you know that your real name is being used, too?

**Lyuda:** Now, yes.

**Vasiliy:** [The book] was a surprise for me. I found out after many people had already read the book.

**Maria:** As I was talking to the people who are in the book, it turned out that some of the people who are in the book, they didn't know about it.

**Sharon:** Characters that I named?

**Maria:** Yes.

**Sharon:** I am trying to think who that might be. Do you remember who it was?

**Maria:** There were several English teachers...

**Sharon:** From the Peace Corps?

**Maria:** No, the Russians.

**Sharon:** Some of those people had only very small parts in the book and there was nothing embarrassing... I didn't bother trying to find them because I couldn't even remember the names and I knew that what I said wouldn't be important to them. So there were dozens like that. I just went ahead and wrote about them without saying anything at all.

...

**Maria:** She actually got really upset.

**Sharon:** Oh, why?

**Maria:** Because there was one situation there in the book where... you called her a spy for Larissa.

**Sharon:** Oh, that somebody said that, yeah. One of my characters called her a spy.

**Maria:** Yes, and you know, there was that word in the book about her and she got really upset about it. And she was upset because, you know, there was her real name there, and this word was attributed to her.

**Sharon:** Yeah, I can see where... I probably would have been upset, too [laughs]. But I mean... that is what I recall had happened, yeah.

**Vasiliy:** Well, not only did she use my name and my patronymic..., she also uses the names of my family members but mixes up my elder daughter's name, she uses it incorrectly.

**Maria:** Did anyone ask you for a permission to use these names?

**Vasiliy:** No, no one did. Absolutely not.

**Maria:** No? Because, as far as I know, some people in the book were asked this permission. But no one contacted you, right?

**Vasiliy:** No, no. As I said, I found out about the book only after many people had read it.

**Sharon:** I got a lot of information from a book called *Stalin's Forgotten Zion*... The author is Robert Weinberg. He is a professor... The book was published by University of California Press. I wrote to him asking permission to use some of his research in my book, and he was very happy to let me do that.

**Maria:** Did Sharon contact you asking for a permission to use your name?

**Lyuda:** No, no.

**Sharon:** The main characters I thought I needed to get their permission. But the minor characters, especially if I wasn't going to say anything bad about them I thought, well, it doesn't matter if I get their permission or not.

**Maria:** Did Sharon contact you asking if she could use your name?

**Denis:** No. I don't know about other people and their names, but she never talked to me about it... But I think it would be ok to publish real names if the person has been asked permission.

**Lyuda:** If she asked my permission [to use my real name] when she was writing the book, I would not mind it at all, because we had such a friendly relationship that I would not even doubt that she would write positively about me and my family.

**Sharon:** There are two characters in particular that I did not contact. And I didn't ask their permission but I wanted to use their stories and so I changed their names because I felt they would not give me permission but I didn't want to embarrass them, so...

**Pavel:** If she had sent me [the drafts]..., first of all, I would have demanded to remove my name, absolutely, immediately. Although, you know, our town is so small, a person can be described and there is no need for the name to guess who this is... So, the name is there, the name is not there, it doesn't really matter...

**Sharon:** I don't know if you studied memoir writing much at all but I think this is kind of a very common thing. People are just often times are not happy about being in someone else's memoir. And this is just... this is to be expected.

**Vasiliy:** I believe that consent is not necessary because we know many examples when one writes a memoir and doesn't ask for permission. Still, objectivity in memoirs, in my opinion, is not in evaluating events but in giving facts. Yes, you don't have to ask my permission. This is your right... Of course, if you describe a bedroom scene, then you have to ask for permission (laughs). In all other cases, I don't think you have to ask for permission. But evaluating something... is not quite right here, I think. If you give an evaluation, then ask the opinion of those who you evaluate: whether they agree or not. And if I disagree, then include my opinion, too... You don't need permission when you just give facts. It happened, it took place, other people saw it, whatever. But evaluation is a subjective concept. And considering yourself right in this situation is not correct.

**Sharon:** I am a journalist. I was a newspaper reporter for many years. So when you write a newspaper story, you know that some people are going to be upset. You don't say, "Oh gee, I better not write that story!" You just say, "I know that some people will be upset but this is interesting and this is not damaging to them, and therefore I am going to write it and not feel bad about it."

**Vasiliy:** People invited her and opened her their doors and their hearts not as a journalist but as a friend, and this could be interpreted as a betrayal. When a journalist is introduced as a journalist, he [sic] is being treated like one, too. But when a journalist did not get introduced as a journalist, but pretended to be the best friend, this is not positive at all. This is not good.

**Sharon:** I can't really speak to that because they didn't tell me. I feel sad that they feel betrayed.

...

You know, it's like a newspaper story. You are just... you are in a situation and then you write about it. Some people know you're writing and others don't. So I didn't see it as a problem.

**Lyuda:** If she had introduced herself as a journalist who is writing a book and had asked questions officially, in an office somewhere, I might have answered them differently, with an understanding that it was going to be published and other people would know about it. But when it's just a friendly socializing and you are not even suspicious that all that would be published and maybe from a completely different perspective, not the one you intended, this... becomes a very different story. I might have behaved completely differently then.

...

**Maria:** Did she ever ask you to meet for an interview, answer questions, or take any notes?

**Lyuda:** No, we did not have any special meetings for that. There were no interview meetings.

**Maria:** So, it's the genre thing.

**Sharon:** Yeah.

**Pavel:** Well, first of all, about journalism. There is journalism and the journalism. Everybody knows that. There is yellow press, right? The one that doesn't hesitate to insult, spread gossip and rumors, make people butt their heads, as I have already said. But there is another journalism, for which all these are tabooed and prohibited. Therefore, one cannot say that there is some general, abstract journalism. It doesn't exist. Everyone chooses her genre and attitude. I just have much doubt that Sharon thinks of herself as being a representative of the yellow press in this case. It is more likely that she thinks of herself just the opposite.

**Maria:** Do you mean the book looks like yellow press?

**Pavel:** Well, the intention was different, I think, but it turned out just the same. The author's intention might as well have been quite different, though.

**Maria:** As a researcher, I have to have permission from my participants in order to write about them, and this is ethical. Would a different genre follow different ethics?



**Denis:** Interesting question. I think that if ethics is truly ethical, then it is applicable for any genre. If you think like, aha, these rules will work in this genre and not in the other, it diminishes the universality of the ethical norms, right? Because ethics is universal, it's unspoken and accepted by any society. And to say that, well, you may write about this in this newspaper but not in another one... If a newspaper violates these norms and people know about it, they know that this newspaper then is yellow press and it publishes gossip. Some of it is not true, some is true. But in any case a person knows that this is yellow press. And this person won't read it if he [sic] respects himself and there is a certain reputation for this newspaper. This paper of course will violate all norms and rules. But the person has a choice and he knows that he makes a conscious decision whether to read it or not.

**Sharon:** I understand that when I am trying to explain the Russian experience, my understanding is limited, too, because I am not Russian and so I am an outsider looking at a culture and sometimes I might get things a little bit wrong.

**Pavel:** I completely understand that the person was looking at our life as an outsider, using her own experience, and it's understandable that our reality was in much contrast with all that... But there [is a moment] that I think should concern any person who writes non-fiction. How can this book impact the relationships of these people that you are writing about? Sharon easily gave facts that one may simply call gossip, and that gossip could make people butt their heads, and, in fact, it did so... So, this author's insensitivity about the situation that could make interpersonal relationships tense shocked me, to be honest.

**Elena:** In fact, when I read it, I got an impression that the person is walking around the town where she is a guest and is looking into the windows, and she stops by only those windows where there is a scandal. Maybe I am wrong. Maybe.

**Sharon:** If something interesting happened or something I wanted to remember or to think about more, then I would write it down. And then I think the hardest part was that I had so much material, hundreds of pages of notes, so then I had to decide what might be interesting generally, not just for me. And those are the things that ended up in the book.

**Elena:** It is the point of view when, in order to attract the audience, there needs to be a scandal for sure. Even in the most innocent situation, if one can find that underlying plot, it will attract interest. If one doesn't find it; i.e., if the situation is not turned by its scandalized side, then it won't be interesting for the reader to read... Maybe it's an attempt to make some money on it.

**Vasiliy:** As for the people, of course, some laughed, some badmouthed. And now, if [Pavel Nikolaevich] as a provost... would do something wrong, people would

immediately remember that book and start talking... Or, when Turbin would say something, there would be talks about him, too.

**Sharon:** There was nothing savage or damaging about people. In fact, I left some of that stuff out. Some characters I could have gone into greater depth and I decided no-no, I don't want to do that.

**Pavel:** I remember [people's] reactions and I would not want to repeat the exact words about [the book].

**Maria:** Were they very strong words?

**Pavel:** These were very strong expressions. Very strong expressions. And from completely different people, by the way. Including those people who have a life outlook very different from mine. In other words, one could have expected at least some different readings of the book. But the reactions I heard of were pretty much the same.

**Sharon:** That's the problem when you are writing. You write a public document and it is for everyone to read. Some people are shy and some people are private, and other people love the attention. So I knew that would happen, I was prepared for that. And I thought it was worth it. I still love these people and I think they are wonderful and you know maybe someday their children might say, "Wow, that's my dad..."

**Vasiliy:** But in the book he looks like a drunk, an absolutely fallen person. And there is nothing about how clever he is and how knowledgeable he is, but there is a description of how he got drunk, how he started drinking and how [Elena] was trying to snatch his shot glass.

**Sharon:** I didn't show them [any drafts] because I didn't want to (laughs). I've been a journalist for many long years and I hardly ever show people what I'm writing. And they can just be surprised when they see the article or the book. And so, far so good. Because I'm careful and I don't exaggerate. I don't tell lies, so... so far, so good. I haven't had any problems that way.

...

At the end of the book I summed up a bunch of situations and it was what you might call a happy ending in most cases. And it was my tribute to people in Birobidjan who, in my opinion, are coping very well with very difficult situations. This is their life, and here I am, an outsider, taking a look at it.

**Pavel:** You know, there are naïve readers, but also there are naïve authors (laughs). These naïve authors sometimes end up with something that they may not have intend for the addressee. It happened to [Sharon] that this unconscious arrogance just got out somehow... I doubt that she would have allowed something like this towards [people in] Santa Barbara. And I don't mean the descriptions of something exotic. It's understandable that Santa Barbara is not exotic for her. I

am talking about treating other people. I doubt that she would have allowed to write about her acquaintances [in Santa Barbara] in the same way, in other words, telling someone about something that one of those acquaintances had confessed only to her personally. But her treatment of Russian acquaintances somehow allowed it.

**Sharon:** I haven't heard very much from a couple of people that I used to be in touch with and I think after they read the book and they thought, well, that was private and I didn't think she would [include it in a book]. But I'm only guessing because they didn't tell me that. I rather understand how someone might feel... a little... I don't know how to say it... if someone wrote about me from their point of view, I probably wouldn't like everything they said either (laughs).

**Vasiliy:** Her CLOSEST friends..., who as I witnessed, were actually her good friends, took the book VERY negatively.

**Maria:** Why?

**Vasiliy:** Why? Well, I don't know. But even [Vera], who is their friend, after reading the book, simply stopped all communication with them... Right away... and others, too.

**Sharon:** But you can't work through something if they just wouldn't even talk to you about it. So I am sad about that but I don't think... I am not going to do anything about it.

**Pavel:** The only thing, I would probably have written her a letter of three-four lines and simply have said all that I think about it. Of course, I wouldn't be able to prevent the publishing of the book, and why would I do that, I don't really need it. But I would have said it all. Later, after the book had been published, [Sharon] asked about my reaction, but at that point I did not feel like reacting any more, not at all. Because I was afraid I would just snap. Of course, I don't have enough English to express everything that I thought, but I would have composed myself and would have done it.

**Maria:** Is there a way to avoid [the conflict], since writing about real people is, in fact, a sensitive issue?

**Lyuda:** The only solution is you either give this person [the opportunity to] read the draft, or you avoid using a real name.

**Sharon:** Again, going back to my old outline of work, I seldom would show my story to the person that I was writing about in advance because not everybody likes everything what they do, or they might change their mind about how they say something... And I did not want to give them control of the material even if it was about them. So I can see that that is something that the character would want but maybe something that would not be to the benefit of the project.

**Maria:** What if you noticed that the author had misunderstood some traditions or had misinterpreted some events, would you help her somehow?

**Lyuda:** Absolutely. This, by the way, is always the main goal of my communication with anyone of a different nationality.

**Elena:** I think [letting us read the drafts] would definitely be of a great help for her and actually for the way the book would be taken. Because then the book would be more honest. In this case both sides of the [story] would be considered.

**Maria:** Suppose you expressed your opinion and [Sharon] includes it in her memoir... Do you think it would be real and help the book?

**Vasiliy:** Of course. First of all, it would be polite to do. Secondly, it would be a different game then, not the one way game... [In the book] she presented everything the way she wanted to see it, without giving the others right to voice their opinions. But only in this case evaluations are permitted.

...

I think that we now cannot defend [ourselves] and express our opinions about the book from HERE [from Russia]. We won't be heard here. But I still hope that, if you start it over there [in the U.S.], publish it somewhere..., then people THERE would understand that you can't always believe the printed word...

I said earlier that this is an imaginary conversation, but it is only partially imaginary because all the words are real and taken from real conversations. This particular conversation is rhetorically constructed and, as any discourse, it has an agenda. Its agenda is to change the power disposition of the memoir production.

The memoir, as a master discourse, was designed, exercised, and is controlled by one power figure – the author. As Sharon said, “I did not want to give them control of the material even if it was about them.” Through its production, this discourse silenced the voices of those who, in fact, contributed with their stories and their lives but were not allowed any power to affect the production of the book or its content. This conversation, therefore, can be viewed as a counter-discourse that has an agenda to shift this power disposition and allow these silenced voices to be heard.

This conversation also proves that, as any human being, I am biased. It also proves that the position of a researcher does not protect from or eliminate this bias. Of course, I exaggerated and placed on the surface of this conversation my agenda to discuss ethical implications of the memoir and to challenge the power status quo. I did so to illustrate how this bias allowed me to fulfill my agenda through my writing the truth. Additionally, I did so to support my argument that writing, including memoir, is a rhetorical act. Therefore, it would be problematic to argue that the memoir is an example of objective discourse, if such a discourse ever existed to begin with. As Elena put it, “Any event can be interpreted... you know, even some facts, if you want to create a negative sensation, you put these facts in such an order, you don’t even have to comment on them, but the negative impression will be created. And this is what happened here, in my opinion” (from interview with Elena).

Similarly, when I was having my conversations with the author and the participants and made the point not to structure them formally, to avoid any predispositions, I still had my agenda and thus influenced those conversations. The predispositions were there already, inside of my researcher’s head, and I learned that to have objective interviews is an impossible task.

Below is an excerpt from my conversation with Denis that provides a clear illustration of my influence as a researcher who initiates the conversation.

**Maria:** When I talked to other participants, they noted that the material in the book is selective, in the way that it presents the most “juicy” moments that would be interesting for an American reader... somewhat exotic. So, the focus was on the material that would sell better for an American audience. Did you have the same feeling?

**Denis:** Yes, yes, I did. Now, when you told about it, I think, yes, I had the same feeling. (from interview with Denis)

Therefore, as a researcher, I have the same, if not bigger, influence on my participants as Sharon, as an author, had on her characters. Sharon's memoir could be presenting facts and real stories but, as Fox admitted in her discourse of the layered account, "*I chose how to present*" (332, emphasis added, MW). We may call it "a rhetoric of fact" and "a rhetoric of the real" (Hesford 132) but we should always remember that even the most factual discourse will be constructed rhetorically. L. Smith refers to Hayden White, who argued that even historical narrative is a "fiction of factual representation" and constructed through language. "[H]e argued that since 'facts do not speak for themselves,' the historian 'speaks on their behalf, and fashions the fragments of the past into a whole whose integrity is – in its representation – a purely discursive one'" (L. Smith 34). Both the memoir and the conversation that I presented above are yet another example of discursive representation. All the quotes are real and I am not making the words up. However, I presented the quotes according to my agenda, just as Sharon presented the stories in the book according to hers.

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*It's a double game and in order to be fair, I have to locate a third space for myself. I am somewhat in the third space already: Geographically, I am in Iowa, in between Russia, to the east, and California where Sharon lives, to the west. I am also in between two cultures: I am still Russian as I will always be, but not completely, not any more. I am well adjusted to American culture and miss it when I travel, miss my home, but part of me will always be foreign to it. It's biculturalism; it's when you're always homesick, no matter where you are.*

As I was trying to represent the positions of the characters, I realized that it was difficult for me to put the author in the position of a villain. As a writer myself, who often collects her data from human subjects and uses these data to create her own argument, her *story*, I could understand some of the decisions in the memoir production, including ethical decisions. In fact, in this very research, I made a decision that I consider unethical but necessary – a decision not to disclose my intentions to the author of the memoir. I feared that, if Sharon learned that I would focus on the ethical (or rather unethical) choices of her memoir, she would shut down her participation in my research. I feared that, in this case, the characters' voices would remain silent and I would not be able to reveal their misrepresentation in the memoir. Because of that fear, I chose to exercise my own power as an author of this research and, to some extent, silence Sharon's voice. I did change the power balance, but I did it at the expense of another person. I did it through the violent act, similar to the ones I criticize in my research.

Although I believe that Sharon was able to guess about my research intentions at some point in our conversations, it was my decision to deceive that caused me pain and made me question my own intentions. I realized that, through my research, I wanted to honor the characters' right to voice their opinions and have those opinions heard, in a very similar way to Sharon's desire "to honor" those people's experiences and stories. In my research, I was not much different from Sharon in her writing. I asked myself then, what was the difference in our understanding of ethics, if we end up with very similar decisions and intentions?

One of the differences, as I see it, is that fact that I deliberately include in my writing the disclosure of my intentions, decisions, and methods of writing. This is my conscious choice that, I believe, complies with the understanding of postmodern ethics (Bauman). My intent to allow the participants contribute and change my discourse is another attempt in postmodern ethics, since I, although only to a certain extent, willingly give up some of my power as an author. When offered to do the same – let the characters see the writing and contribute to it – Sharon refused the idea and tried to explain her decision by the following analogy:

Well, they might say, “I didn’t mean to say that” or “I don’t think I look good in this. You’re painting me in the light that doesn’t make me look good.” But that... for example, if you’re modeling for an artist and they are drawing your picture and you didn’t like it, and you’re going to say, “I’m not going to buy it.” But the artist still has the right to paint it the way the artist perceives it. You can choose not to accept it but you can’t choose to stifle other person’s way of expression. (from interview with Sharon)

I would argue, however, that this example cannot be an accurate analogy to the situation with the memoir writing. The person who is having her portrait painted was given a choice to model, and it is likely that she made her own decision to be a model for an artist. While modeling, she also was probably aware of the consequences and potential risks (e.g., she may not like the end product). She *chose* to be portrayed while most of the book characters were not allowed to choose whether they want to be in the book or not. From the very start, they were stripped of any power. Sharon simply says: “I did not want to give them control” (from interview with Sharon). Naturally, the characters’ reaction was to protest. Moreover, they claim their right to participate and change the narrative:

**Elena:** If you may not understand something, ask and people will explain it to you. If we had a chance to read at least something [from the drafts], then at least I



could have said that this point of view cannot be used like this. (from interview with Elena)

**Lyuda:** If I had seen that there was some information there that unpleasant for me personally, I would have asked to take out this information, because, as it goes in one Russian saying, the world is very small and there is no guarantee that a person who knows me very well would not read this book and take wrongly what is written about me in this book. In other words, *I am not anonymous, I am a real person who actually exists*. (from interview with Lyuda, emphasis added, MW)

The participants claim their agency but at the same time they realize that this is not the situation where they can or even want to participate actively. I think that they understand intuitively “the difficulty and danger of transforming private pain into public and political acts” (Hesford 120). They have already been hurt by the public disclosure through the memoir and, therefore, some of them try to avoid further discussions. When Pavel tried to explain why two of the characters refused to participate in my project, he said, “I can imagine why [they refused]. First of all, because... I think here tactfulness played its role primarily and also unwillingness to return to this [situation] once again.” Later, as I continued and suggested my own explanation, he added, “People just don’t want to air dirty laundry. That was a very exact expression that you found” (from interview with Pavel). For the characters, the memoir became a sensitive topic in 2004, when it was published, and it still is. In accordance with Russian cultural views (as I understand them) on solving the private issues within the intimate circle, they prefer to heal by following the maxim of taking the high road:

**Lyuda:** I would not say there were any conflicts [after the book]. In any case, though, this was a very delicate topic. When we would come across this topic, people preferred not to discuss it at all, because it is a delicate topic and such topics usually are not being discussed in a company of intelligentsia. (from interview with Lyuda)

In my further analysis, I will try to understand what determines the positions of the characters, the author, and the researcher in their negotiations of the power. Is it a personal choice that stops the characters from active protest? Or, are there any contextual (cultural, political, genre, etc.) constraints that help construct and reproduce the power relations? Specifically, I will focus on the following issues in my next chapter:

- **The context of non-fiction writing.** How do various contextual features affect the ethics of writing?
- **The author's responsibility.** What impact can writing have on the readers and the society?
- **Implications on memoir writing.** How does memoir writing affect stereotypes? How is it different from the traditional colonizing travel writing? What is the connection between a memoir writer and a researcher, and between memoir and research production?

## Chapter 6. “Who am I?” The problem of representation, power, and ethnographic authority

“If your works gets published, I wish then that there would be more writers or those who are going to write who would notice this research, and when they write, would be more, if not careful, then at least treating those people they write about with more understanding and anticipating the reaction that their writing may lead to.” (from interview with Denis)

“My wish is that this work is successful because this could be our only chance to rehabilitate ourselves somehow, and for Sharon to [understand] her mistakes.” (from interview with Vasiliy)

“We can never, despite all our best efforts, tell the whole story.” (Gere 211)

After I completed the first stages of my research – my interviews with the author and other participants – I started realizing that, after being in this project for almost two years and sharing the history of the memoir and its stories, it would be a mistake to treat my project as a sterile research, where all that matters are the hypothesis, methods, theoretical framework, and conclusions. In my research, I noticed that I have developed relationships with my participants: Some of those relationships carried on from my time in Russia, and some developed because of the conversations I shared with the participants. The memoir’s stories prompted an exchange of emotions, produced even more stories, and even created certain bonds that, to me, stretched way beyond the formal relationship of a subject/researcher. For instance, as I was talking with the author, she shared with me her observations of the mother/daughter relationships in Russia, and I immediately commented on this observation:

**Sharon:** One thing that I LOVED was... it seemed to me that a lot of mothers and daughters [in Russia] that we met were very close to each other and had a good

relationship. And I think in America, when the daughters become teenagers, they begin to pull away from their parents.

**Maria:** Oh, tell me about it. I have a 13-year old.

**Sharon:** You do?

**Maria:** Yeah (both laugh)

**Sharon:** So, you KNOW what I mean.

**Maria:** I know (both laugh)

**Sharon:** But it seemed to me in Russia the mothers and daughters stayed close and I thought that was so wonderful. Do you think that's true too?

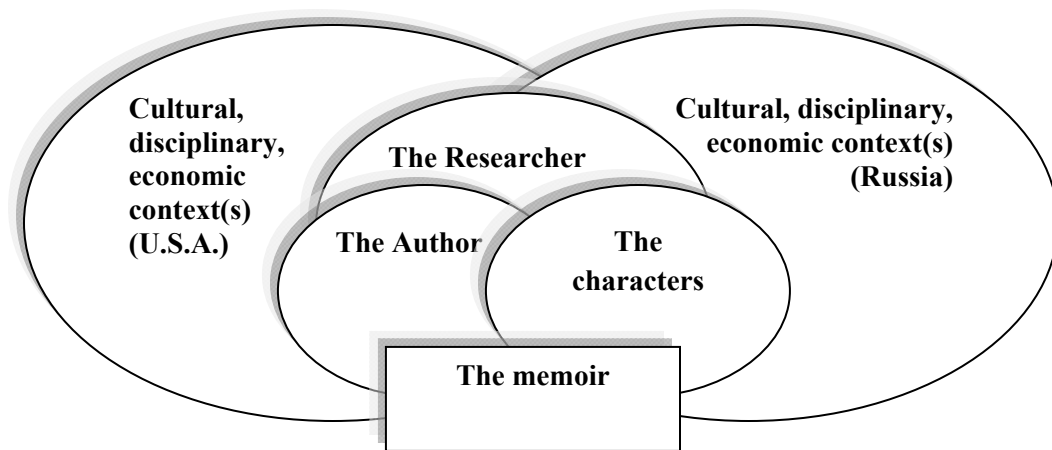
**Maria:** I think so. I think I would probably agree with you. (from interview with Sharon)

In this situation, we were talking not as a researcher and a subject, but as two women, thus creating a very human connection. Another participant, Denis, was actually able to see that telling personal stories through memoirs became, in a way, a similar experience in humanizing and making meaningful personal experiences: "I also learned much about other people [in Birobidjan], because [Sharon] describes her relationships with other faculty, so I was able to learn about these people from a different perspective. Not from the student's perspective but from a different, more human perspective" (from interview with Denis). This view somewhat echoes Sharon's explanation of her storyteller's position: "I am not that much of a judge. I was just interested in what I can see and observe, and trying to cope with different ways of being... It's just fascinating" (from interview with Sharon).

Naturally, such a realization made me start asking myself about all of our positioning in this situation – as a researcher, as an author, as characters or research subjects, as friends, too – and about the relationship we form along the way. These relationships impacted my research: the way I collected my data, interpreted it, and started drawing conclusions. Or, to go back, the way the author, too, compiled her journal notes, decided to write a book, finished and published it. Most importantly, I became

curious to analyze how these relationships determined our decisions and our ethics as non-fiction writers – both of the memoir and of the research.

As I abandoned my pretense for a sterile research, I gained an understanding of the context that shapes the relationships I just discussed. In a very Bakhtinian way, this understanding helps us realize that the writer does not simply arrive with a text. Any text and any utterance is always preceded and followed by other utterances. Everything that we carry with us into our position of the writer – our education, background, cultural, social and economic status, to name just a few – determines the relationships we develop with our book characters or research participants, and, ultimately, determines the writing itself. Such a context of our writing became the third layer of my research (see Figure 4.)



**Figure 4.** The third layer of the research

During the data analysis described in the previous two chapters, I kept asking myself, why does the author write about the others the way she does (because she can), and why do I write about the others the way I do (because I can)? Furthermore, why do we make different decisions about the ethicality of our writing? Are they even different? Some of these decisions may be determined by personal characteristics of an individual,

as both Pavel and Vasiliy suggested (Pavel: “We talk about necessary tact with such things as sharing someone’s opinions and sensitive judgments with others.” Vasiliy: “It is mostly a personal [problem], but cultural, too... I am more than sure that even L., who worked with [Sharon], would NOT do anything like that. And I can’t imagine C. would write such a book. I can imagine that they would ACCEPT the book very well there, but I can’t imagine them DOING the same.” From interviews with Pavel and Vasiliy).

However, in this chapter, I will argue that the *context* of non-fiction writing plays an important role in the writer’s decisions about ethics in writing. The context allows the writer to function as an agent who has the power and control over her work (the type of agency that was refused to the memoir’s characters).

This context is necessarily multidimensional in the way it impacts the writer’s agency. Hesford argued that “agency is fluid, not static, and that personal and political agency exists in relation to and emerges from particular historical struggles, institutional contexts, and power relations” (121). I admit that the scope of this research will not allow me to cover all of the forces that affect writing. I will analyze, therefore, only the three dimensions that I view as the most defining in my research: disciplinary and genre differences, material differences, and cultural differences. I specifically will focus on these differences because I argue that they provide necessary means for the writers (the author and the researcher) to create and sustain the power inequality that allows them to maintain the ethical judgment evident in their works. Let me begin with a discussion of how the author’s power can be evident through her texts.

Throughout my research, I maintained that the message in writing, as well as truth and representation, is rhetorically constructed through interpretation. In Chapter 4, I

offered different, or parallel, readings by the participants of the corresponding stories from the memoir; in Chapter 5, I demonstrated how one can construct a conversation (and an argument) using real quotes by the participants. Similarly, writer's power and authority will be constructed through her texts. As Mortensen and Kirsch argued, "Writers can claim authority if their writing has voice, and if that voice allows readers access to the writer's 'mind' and 'experience'" (563). They also refer to social theories that claim, "authority is never inherent in texts or minds, but rather is negotiated and constructed in discourse by individuals who observe *conventions for the representation of knowledge*" (563, emphasis added, MW). In this chapter, I will start with an attempt to trace such conventions that allow the author to negotiate authority and power.

Earlier in my data analysis, I compared the Peace Corps memoir to traditional travel writing that goes back to several centuries ago. This traditional travel writing sometimes serves as an example of colonizing writing: White, educated, wealthy, and powerful travelers would go on an adventure journey to exotic places and, upon their return, write stories of their travels by co-opting the stories of others. I also have pointed at the connection of such travel writing with traditional ethnographic research (cf., Clifford and Marcus). Now, I am interested to see if I can find features of such writing in the memoir itself.

As I once again analyzed the text of *Beyond Siberia*, I found an example where the author directly refers to the ethos of a traditional traveler and writer: "We wanted to be latter-day explorers" (*Beyond Siberia* 3). Also, I found a few places where I felt there was an emulation of what I am inclined to call "a colonizer's view," in which the writer is a protagonist trying to enlighten the natives of the country she travels to. This approach

does not necessarily bear negative intent, quite the opposite; however, it makes it very clear where the power is located. Below is an example of this approach:

We volunteers thought it would be a great idea to teach Russian schoolchildren about civics – democracy and group effectiveness. Peace Corps volunteers could do this in their English-language classes. They could teach the basic concepts of democracy by helping the students design a structure of class leadership... And when [the students] reached adulthood, they would be ready for leadership roles in the next generation. (*Beyond Siberia* 306)

The author has the best intentions in this situation. The situation as described, however, implies that what Russian children know about leadership is either inferior to the volunteers' knowledge, or simply non-existent. In either way, the situation is viewed as abnormal, problematic, and in need of a "fix."

Additionally, there are many places in the memoir where the author's view is simply patronizing, and she uses the language that makes the reader think of the characters and situations described as inferior, lacking, inappropriate, deprived, and underprivileged in comparison to the author and her reality. It might be perfectly true in the author's eyes or according to any objective evaluation as well. However, it seems to me that such a one-dimensional representation contributed to the characters' angst and their feeling of being displayed in the negative light. Below are a few examples from the memoir.

One day the beautiful Svetlana, whose mother was a television personality in Komsomolsk, came to my class wearing a black bra and lacy see-through blouse, a shiny black skirt split from knee to crotch in front, in black and on both sides, shiny satin-like stockings, and spiked-heeled boots. Interestingly, the boys didn't gawk, or even, for that matter, seem to notice. (*Beyond Siberia* 81)

Not a minute later came another banging on the door. We opened it a crack and in came Kommandant Valentina with a bottle of vodka and accompanied by several other members of the wedding party – the two sets of parents, we guessed, and an



assortment of gold-toothed matrons and pot-bellied men with red faces. (*Beyond Siberia* 85)

“The [embassy officer] refused me,” Irina [who was applying for a visa to Israel] said. “He told me I looked like a prostitute, and Israel would not want me<sup>15</sup>. What do you think of that?”

Since she asked me, I told Irina she would have a better chance if she wore a looser sweater, a longer skirt, lower heels, and a lot less makeup. (*Beyond Siberia* 142)

Viktor, the potbellied, vodka-drinking party animal we had last socialized with at the winter picnic. (*Beyond Siberia* 197)

The men would go to the endless round of holiday parties, glum-faced, eat too much and talk too little, until the edict was relaxed; then they would grab the nearest vodka bottle, toast each other, and dance with single women and other men’s wives. (*Beyond Siberia* 291)

By the end of the evening, on our way home, there were drunks stumbling down the streets, occasionally breaking into song. There were drunken men, young and old, drunken women, young couples on the bus, inebriated people laughing, yelling, or somberly trudging along, bumping into walls. (*Beyond Siberia* 322)

“If she had grown up in America,” John said, “she would still have her molars, her skin would be better, and she’d have a pair of decent glasses.” (*Beyond Siberia* 336)

Sharon herself shared with me that one of the characters openly expressed her disappointment at seeing the way the town and its people were portrayed in the memoir:

“The only comment I got from her was that she was embarrassed by my portrayal of Birobidjan and of the public life” (from interview with Sharon).

It was probably natural that, after observing the differences between the two countries and realizing that Russian people had different ways of doing things, even in the college setting, the author felt that, in many ways, the “American way” of doing those

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<sup>15</sup> The evaluation by an Israeli officer is common for officers in the U.S. embassy and consulates in Russia as well.

things was better or superior. In some cases, she actually shared her appreciation for and an attempt to understand and adjust to those differences:

In the [Russian] classroom, that [sense of community] seemed to translate into wanting to help each other TOO MUCH (laughs). Some of the American teachers were pretty upset because they thought everybody was cheating. And really what they are doing was they were trying to help each other out or explain something to each other, you know, SHARE with each other. So that's quite a cultural difference. We had to not put a label on it, it's just a different way of being in a classroom: less competitive and more cooperative. (from interview with Sharon)

In other cases, especially in the first chapters of the book, the author was still viewing her surrounding as something different, exotic, not necessarily good, and thus worth of criticism:

The home reading textbook, held together by string and willpower, contained hundred-year-old British short stories whose common theme was their complete insipid innocuousness. The most exciting tales in them were the O. Henry stories. There were occasional passages from Jack London and W. Somerset Maugham, but not enough for plot or even dramatic tension. (*Beyond Siberia* 55)

It is interesting, though, to note that the educational system and approaches (which Sharon criticized in the book more than once), in fact, delivered quite admirable results. The modest comment by Pavel could be shared by many Russians, in my opinion, when they traced the roots of their knowledge about the U.S.: “I am not an americanist<sup>16</sup> and I would not want to make any general conclusions about American culture. Simply because I don't know it very well; I mostly know America from its literature: from Hemingway, from Faulkner...” (from interview with Pavel).

Ironically, Sharon's memoir seemed to create “enough for plot or... dramatic tension,” an effect opposite to the “insipid innocuousness” of the stories she criticized in

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<sup>16</sup> In the Russian language, a scholar who studies and is an expert in the American society and culture.

the students' curriculum. Some parts of the book may suggest why Russian participants found the book inappropriate for public display and bordering on gossip:

As for history professors Tanya and Oleg, Vera said they had 'a compatible and stable intimate relationship,' although at times Oleg 'strives to give the impression of being wiser and more mature than he is.'...

In another interesting marriage among our faculty, there was Svetlana, the head of the Russian department, who had a doctor's degree in Russian language and literature, and her husband, a common laborer...

For sheer volume of gossip they inspired, the most interesting couple at the college was Larisa Belichenko and Sergei Mikhailovich Turbin. (*Beyond Siberia* 182-83)

It is also understandable that, as a traveler, Sharon reflected on her experience in Russia and compared it to life in the U.S.: "We counted the freedoms we took for granted, such as the freedom to enter a building without explaining why, freedom to travel to another city without having to register with the local police, freedom to walk down a street without being randomly stopped and asked for identification papers" (*Beyond Siberia* 351). I can similarly count the freedoms I, as still a non-citizen, lack in the U.S.: freedom to travel to professional conferences without being randomly asked on the train for all my visa and university paperwork, freedom to have a career that I have earned by my education and professional experience, freedom to have a family without fear of being separated and sent to countries on the both sides of the Atlantic.

Sharon admitted on multiple occasions during the interviews that she wrote the book as a travel writer and as a journalist. She also admitted that it is usually difficult to move beyond the surface and understand the lives of the others if you are just a visitor in the country. Therefore, she was determined to stay in Russia longer, in order to accomplish a better understanding of it: "Writing travel stories for the *Los Angeles Times* had also had an impact on my thinking. I travelled to exotic places, but never for time to

do more than touch the surface – see the sights, talk to people, absorb enough color and history to write a story. The desire grew to stay in one place long enough to get below the surface” (*Beyond Siberia* 66). It is still questionable, in my mind, if she accomplished her goal.

Take, for instance, a description of Christmas holiday traditions in Russia given in the book: “Only the oldest people had any childhood memories of Christmas songs and the religious aspect of Christmas was all but stamped out. Some secular traditions remained, but in a changed form... New Year’s Eve, not Christmas, had become the time for gift-giving” (*Beyond Siberia* 110-11). As a native Russian myself, who was born and raised in Communist Russia, I would argue that this representation is not quite correct. The religious aspect of Christmas has, in fact, been preserved in Russia more so than in many other places: New Year’s day is the time for consumerism (tree, shopping for presents, Santa, etc.) but Christmas is reserved by Russians for the religious celebration of the savior’s birthday. Russian Orthodox Christmas simply does not have contemporary Western associations with the time for gifts from Santa. I do not think Sharon completely understood this difference.

In a similar example, the author criticizes the way her Russian students wrote essays; the essays, in her opinion, were rather disorganized and far from the standards she was used to in the U.S.:

We both used John’s textbook for our writing classes; it was their first exposure to organizing their writing into the essay format that Americans learn in their early years of school. We were used to getting papers from our Russian students that read like a stream of consciousness – from the first words that came into their minds about any given topic to the last words they could remember about it. (*Beyond Siberia* 139)

Again, as a professional with an M.A. degree in TESOL (Teaching English for Speakers of Other Languages), I would argue that this comment, in my mind, simply reveals that the author is unaware of rhetorical and cultural differences in writing discourses produced by native and non-native speakers. The writing she saw her Russian students produce is not atypical for the culture. This apparent lack of experience with intercultural writing prevented her from appreciating and building her pedagogy on these differences; it became easier to mold the Russian students' writing into a standard American essay format.

An attentive reader might already have noticed that, in my comments above, I started producing patronizing overtones myself, not much different from those in the memoir that I criticized earlier. In my self-reflection, I realized that I, too, am building the power relationship where I make the author of the memoir the one without control, the one who is powerless. In fact, I even construct a very distinct functional category of my authority – the authority of expertise. Mortensen and Kirsch described how authority channels power and argued that “[authority] acts as a conduit to translate power into effect, at times to traduce power as enlightened, rational behavior” (559). In my commentaries, I act as a representative of the “enlightened, rational behavior” by using the logical support of my ethnic background and my academic degree, for my argument, in a very similar fashion to Sharon’s construction of the protagonist “enlightened” ethos, the one who comes from the society, where they know better how to dress appropriately, what books to read, and how to celebrate Christmas. She is the author of her text, and I am the author of my text; we are not different at all in the ways we construct our authority and power.

The characters of the book and my participants could recognize this power of the author. Moreover, they started thinking that the particular power relationships created and maintained by the author through the memoir made possible her ethical choices and decisions about how to treat her characters and their stories.

**Denis:** This is written about Russia, you know, and any book written in this manner in the West would bring the same reaction, I think. Because I have a feeling like, you know, when some civilized people from civilized countries come to someplace in Africa, and start writing. Then they go home, write their stories, as it turns out – about people who are savages! And then it's like, it might not even be necessary to consider these people's opinions... (from interview with Denis)

**Pavel:** [People's right for] privacy, by the way, is one of the values of the American society, if I understand it correctly. But this [value] seems to work for the American society; once it has to do with something outside of this society, something exotic, this value somehow stops working. There are double standards. Pardon me, I can't think of another word. (from interview with Pavel)

It is interesting to note though that, in spite of their anger and frustration, the participants express their willingness to forgive the author her treatment of their stories in the book. They express the feeling that I would call “the gratitude of the colonized” (cf., Louis A. Perez, Jr.), when the colonizer's good deeds outweigh her mistreatments of the Other: “When Sharon and John worked here, they were in good relationships with everybody and they did a lot of work, [setting up] a good library; and people [in Birobidjan] were very grateful for the work they did” (from interview with Lyuda). The author herself proudly described the library in the memoir, remembering to note the name plaques: “The college had an expanded library with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves and a plaque on the wall inscribed with our names” (*Beyond Siberia* 364). Once again, she is the protagonist in the story. The participants went on to explain why they should feel gratitude:

**Lyuda:** Some took positively what was written in the book, but again, why? Because of the work [Sharon and John] did when they were employed by the institute... And this is why, when they [in Birobidjan] found some tactless parts in the book, they decided, ok, it can be forgiven for all the big work [Sharon and John] did for us here. We can understand them and we can forgive them. This is again, the openness of the Russian soul. (from interview with Lyuda)

**Pavel:** Actually, just a day earlier I said, Lena, when you give your interview, remember one thing: you were welcomed as a guest in their home. There might be some over-the-top frustration and hurt, on the one hand... But on the other hand, you need to understand that they welcomed you in that home. (from interview with Pavel)

**Elena:** Although of course I should be grateful to them. They welcomed me for several days in their home, and again I felt the same warmth and friendship. (from interview with Elena)

Pavel added an interesting comment that allowed me to expand my “colonizer versus colonized” framework:

If Sharon had addressed the book to the American audience only, and she has the right to do so, then there are no problems. But it turned out to be addressed to the people here; otherwise, she would not have sent it here. And what was the POINT of this, I didn’t quite understand. She is either incapable to see this act through the eyes of her reader... I am not quite ready to talk of her as a colonizer. It is more likely that such things, you know, are unconscious. In other words, she is who she is, and she cannot be anybody else. (from interview with Pavel)

This comment made me start thinking about who the author is in writing her book (A travel writer? A journalist? A memoir writer?), and who I am in writing my research (A researcher? A rhetorician? A PhD candidate co-opting the others’ stories to finish her degree?). If we are completely honest and ethical in our writing, what do we need to and must reveal, in order to explain and justify our choices in writing about others? As I started looking for answers to these questions, I investigated the contexts of our writing, their differences and constraints, and the first differences that seemed to be right there, on the surface, were disciplinary differences.

### Disciplinary differences

Pavel's words "she is who she is, and she cannot be anybody else" prompted my analysis of disciplinary and genre differences, since both Sharon and I are writers of our *texts*. It seemed logical to discuss what makes us write differently and what discourse and disciplinary constraints we have that monitor our decisions about ethics. In fact, my other participant, Denis, raised the same question:

**Denis:** Look, you are doing this study now and you write so it gets published. In order to make your research legitimate, you have to have consent from the person you receive your data from, right?

**Maria:** Yes, absolutely.

**Denis:** Why is it necessary? It is necessary to protect the person you are writing about, right? But in this case [of the book], it did not happen. There are some ethical rules that people should follow.

**Maria:** Would you call them universal?

**Denis:** Well, I don't know about universal. Probably yes, but these are rules for the academy. If you collected some data but violated some rules, you may not publish your research. It won't be accepted. Here is the same situation, I think. Although what she wrote is not academic research... I think people who know about... certain ethical rules, they would squint, but the thing is, they wouldn't know if these are real names or not. The book doesn't say, "The names used in this book are pseudonyms." This is why the reader may not even understand that these are real names.

**Maria:** So, supposedly, I am writing a book and I can write whatever I want about people and use their real names, as long as they don't know about it? Is it ok then?

**Denis:** Well, I think maybe this is how it was planned to be. Maybe it was intended for a Western audience.

In his comments, Denis discusses the essential characteristics of discipline-specific texts: purpose, context, and audience. In other words, why do we produce texts, what surrounds the production of these texts, and who do we write for? I investigated how production and decision-making about ethics in my text (research) is different from production and decision-making about ethics in Sharon's text (memoir). In order to do that, I refer below to opinions from three experts: the Director of Research Assurances in



my university, who approved my research; a professional writer, who published her memoirs and won numerous awards for her writing; and a university professor of journalism.

The first major difference that I uncovered is in defining the purpose of writing in the disciplines. My writing is viewed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) as a project conducted for research purposes defined by federal regulations as “a *systematic* investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, *designed* to develop or contribute to *generalizable* knowledge” (hhs.gov, original emphasis). Since my project falls into this definition and I am affiliated with the university, the IRB committee has an obligation to establish whether my research sufficiently protects “the rights and welfare of human research participants involved in research activities as prescribed by federal regulations.” According to the Director, the compliance with the federal regulations, including those about human subjects in research, is a cornerstone and the basis of ethics in research. In other words, my decisions about ethics in my project are being regulated by federal policies and monitored by a special committee, to ensure that the participants in my study are treated fairly and ethically. At the same time, as Denis correctly noted, failure to follow the regulations will compromise my text (an academic research) and make it devoid of credibility in the eyes of my readers, who belong to the academy and write within the same disciplinary constraints and regulations. In fact, my readers would not even see my text, because professional journals would not publish research that contains compromised data.

The ethical guidelines for the protection of human subject were developed from *The Belmont Report* (hhs.gov) written in 1979. This report was prompted by ethical

controversies and questions that followed the reported abuses of human subjects, especially during medical experiments in Nazi concentration camps during WWII. The Nuremberg code was one of the results of the Nuremberg War Crime Trials and set standards for scientific work involving human subjects. *The Belmont Report* established basic ethical principles that included 1) respect for persons (“individual should be treated as autonomous agents, and... persons with diminished autonomy are entitled to protection”), 2) beneficence (“do not do harm and... maximize possible benefits and minimize possible harm”), and 3) justice (“Who ought to receive the benefits of research and bear its burdens?”) (hhs.gov, *The Belmont Report*). It is important to realize, though, that *The Belmont Report* was prompted by and thus centers on the physical mistreatment of human subjects. Although it does state that there are “risks of psychological harm,... legal harm, social harm and economic harm” (hhs.gov, *The Belmont Report*), the discussion in each section begins by addressing the physical, not psychological or emotional involvement of human subjects. *The Belmont Report* identifies the abovementioned “principles, or general prescriptive judgments,” but these judgments, in my mind, fail to discuss substantially the ethics involved in making judgments about protecting human subjects psychologically and emotionally. The report itself admits that “Such rules often are inadequate to cover complex situations; at times they come into conflict, and they are frequently difficult to interpret or apply. Broader ethical principles will provide a basis on which specific rules may be formulated, criticized and interpreted” (hhs.gov, *The Belmont Report*).

The approval for my project, then, was based on the decisions guided by the discussed principles of respect, beneficence, and justice<sup>17</sup>. I believe, however, that complex ethical situations, like the one with my project, might be difficult to judge using these principles. I probably act fully responsible according to the first principle: My participants are allowed to see my drafts; they may have their names changed, if they wish so; and they even can add clarifications or comments to my writing. However, one of them, the author of the memoir, was not granted these freedoms. One may argue that she is not given the same respect in this situation, as compared to other participants, and this is against the first principle. I realize this and my decision was made with complete awareness of this contradiction and with the permission of the IRB. In my defense, I argue that the author of the book and the rest of my participants are in essentially different power positions from the very start of this story, from the writing of the memoir. From the beginning, the author was the one with the power, and she still is, having her book published and thus her opinion voiced publicly. The respect (according to the first principle) that I give the participants partially compensates their lack of power and voice. According to research practice, I am studying them down (they were powerless), while I am studying the author up (she still has more power). I am located in between these two

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<sup>17</sup> It is interesting to note that amongst the members of the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research who worked on *The Belmont Report* there were eight males and only three females (hhs.gov). If one agrees with my earlier argument about the development of ethics and truth in the Western society through marginalizing powerless voices, including females and minorities, then it might be useful to initiate a discussion of *The Belmont Report* as a possible reflection of such a development. A question can arise then, why are the emotional wellbeing of the human subjects and the notions of mercy and compassion either silenced in the report, or not as prominent as subjects' physical wellbeing and the notion of justice?

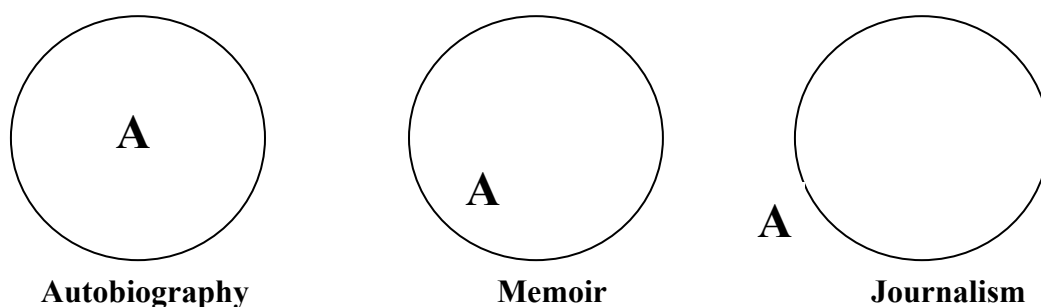
sets of the participants that I have, and my task then is to protect those who have even less power than me.

The second principle, beneficence, seems to be equally problematic. The power distribution once again makes the author more vulnerable to the exposure, although one may see in my project yet another opportunity for her to establish more publicity for her book. Similarly, when I assume that having a voice and expressing their opinions on the pages of my project should benefit the rest of the participants, in reality this further exposure may cause them pain and discomfort. After all, two of the book's characters refused to participate in this study, probably because of this very reason.

Finally, the principle of justice can be argued as well. Since the book's characters are the ones who bear the burden, they should be the ones receiving the benefits. In a way, I do hope that the characters' seeing their words on these pages and making their contributing stories heard will become beneficial for them, as well as any others who may appear in similar situations. On the other hand, the end product of this research, the dissertation, will make me the sole beneficiary. At the end, it will be me who receives a degree, a job that could follow, and benefits and privileges that it would bring.

This discussion demonstrates how, even in a very strictly regulated environment, such as an academy, writing can still problematize the decisions about ethics. What happens then in an environment that does not have federal regulations to at least somehow guide the writer's ethics? Does writing a creative piece, such as a memoir, have any restrictions or taboos? When I asked the Director of Research Assurances these questions, she simply said that, since such writing is not produced for research purposes, in terms of the regulations, the author "is free."

Another expert, the memoir writer that I talked to, argued that the genre of memoir actually has many strains and threats to it, as well as many perspectives. Also, it is important to understand that the author is situated differently in the texts written in different genres. The memoir writer tried to explain this positioning visually (see Figure 5). In autobiography, the author is in the center of the text, and the events and stories told in autobiography are linked directly to the author and serve as constituents of her own life story. Generally, in a memoir, the author does not take the center position, but is located closer to the margins of the stories. Finally, in journalism, the author takes an outsider position; she observes the stories but does not participate in them.



**Figure 5.** Positioning of the author in different genres

Sharon seemed to utilize features of all these genres. She often is the center of the story and claims that the book is about her own experience in Russia. She called her book a memoir and included stories of others as well. Finally, she claims that she wrote the book coming from her journalistic background. In fact, she uses the particular features of these genres to explain her decisions and shield herself from criticism. At one point Sharon said, “You know, it’s like a newspaper story, you are just... you are in a situation and then you write about it. Some people know you’re writing and others don’t. So I didn’t see it as a problem” (from interview with Sharon). At another point she said, “I

don't know if you studied memoir writing much at all but I think this is kind of a very common thing. People are just often times are not happy about being in someone else's memoir. And this is just... this is to be expected" (from interview with Sharon). It seems to me, then, that Sharon is successfully blending the features of the genres and uses this blend to justify her position.

However, the memoir writer I talked to believed that "straight journalists" keep themselves out of the story and, thus, maintain the objectivism in their writing. She also believes, however, that this is a professional illusion, and I tend to agree with her, adding that keeping oneself out of the story is a rhetorical decision as well. Every journalist piece will still be affected by the journalist's viewpoints, affiliation, education, etc. The memoir writer suggested that what Sharon did might be closer to so-called immersion journalism, where the author writes about the story *and* her immersion in the story. She said that an example of one of the first immersion journalist writings would be Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. Capote was in a similar position of power as Sharon, and was dead on with the facts. Unlike Sharon, though, Capote originally had no personal stake in the life of people he was writing about; he went into the situation as a journalist and was open about it. Sharon, on the other hand, did not introduce herself to the people in Birobidjan as a journalist who writes about her travels. She had an ethos of a Peace Corps volunteer that I will discuss later, was introduced as a new colleague of the people she met, and became their friend. It is interesting that when Capote eventually developed an emphatic position through his writing, he started grappling with ethical dilemmas himself, because he felt he started using people's stories to forward his own story-telling.

In Sharon's situation, the memoir writer saw that Sharon was co-opting the stories of others and did it without disclosing her journalist position, which, the writer believed, was the essential ethical issue. I was wondering, though, if it is even possible to write a memoir (or a research study, for that matter) without co-opting the others' stories. The memoir writer believed that this co-opting is unavoidable. However, she said that there are specific ways to reduce the power of the memoir author, in order to put the author and her characters in a somewhat equal position in the writing. For instance, she explained that when she writes her memoirs, she would use only as much of the others' stories that is necessary to tell her own story. Those stories have to add to the author's, and they are not told to scandalize the writing or entertain the reader. She also would work very consciously to establish the context of the story, to make the reader understand why the story is being told. In my perception, this was exactly what Sharon's memoir is missing. Often, it is not clear what the purpose and context of a particular story is in *Beyond Siberia*, as the stories are told without any reflection or explanation. Also, rarely do the stories of others' contribute to Sharon's story in the book. I think her writing failed to bridge the gap between her life and the lives of the others' in her book, and such a dissonance could have contributed to the characters' feeling of being watched and judged by an outsider who comes from a different reality, with different values.

The memoir writer I talked to also offered her explanation of the feelings shared by the characters of *Beyond Siberia*. She suggested that these feelings could be intensified by the experience of not being used to the act of being represented and portrayed in literature or art. "Being recorded in the work of literature is not comfortable at all," she said. It is different for the author of that work, though. According to the

memoir writer, Sharon's (or anyone's) decision to put herself *in* the story (unlike a "straight journalist") is a rhetorical strategy. The author becomes a subject in the narrative to make the story authentic. The memoir writer, however, warned against turning such writing into vanity work, and suggested that the focus should be on the ethicality of such a decision. The author should question her motives when she decides to be in the narrative. For instance, when the memoir writer I talked to puts herself in the narrative, she tries to create a fair balance of the stories told: "If I am hard on someone in the narrative, I'd be twice as hard on myself." Through her writing, she makes *herself* more vulnerable and open to the reader than any of her other characters. I believe that this strategy allows her to balance the power as well; by revealing her own stories at a greater extent than the characters' stories, the author can willingly give up part of her power as the creator of the text. To me, it resembles an act of a performative, postmodern ethics (cf., Bauman).

In my conversation with the memoir writer, the issue of power became connected with the problem of private/public in a text. Her opinion was that power is reflected through multiple differences between the writer and her characters. These differences could be in education, life styles, etc. But, eventually, they materialize through the text, namely, through the decisions the writer makes about what information to reveal about the others and what information to leave behind. The memoir writer shared with me several examples when writers of memoir would assume the identity they never had, the culture they never experienced, and the events they never participated in. We all know similar examples. Often, the outraged reader would demand the publisher to check the facts in a memoir before publishing the book. However, unlike in the situation with my



research, there is no an IRB committee to monitor the process of producing the text. As the memoir writer put it, “there is no mechanism to check the facts.”

As a result, a writer who works on a memoir usually enjoys the freedom of ‘playing God’ and arranging the stories of others into her own constructed narrative. And it seems that the only control “mechanism” in such situations would be what the memoir writer called “a gut check.” It becomes a sole personal decision of the author monitored by her own ethical standards. The memoir writer I talked to described for me the revision process she herself goes through when she writes her memoirs. After writing about one particularly emotional story, she started revising and “realized that it was a mean-spirited description. It wasn’t true.” She “realized [her] anger and that it was not right.” She took the story out of the text. When talking about Sharon’s book, she suggested that if Sharon only “went back, sat down,” and attempted some self-reflection not only about the stories in the book, but also about *how* and *why* she wrote them, “imagine how richer the book would be.” In fact, she added that “sometimes writing that is more nuanced” becomes “more truthful and credible. Sometimes it’s not *what* you write, but *how* you frame it.” One of my characters, Pavel, expressed his opinion in even more direct and defining terms: “I have a certain view about America, too... But I am not ready to translate this view to American people in particular, because this might be very unpleasant for these people. In other words, I would never allow myself to do this, neither in written form, nor in print” (from interview with Pavel).

Pavel’s words support the argument that the author bears personal responsibility for her writing and for the effect it produces on the audience. Although Sharon defines her audience quite broadly (“It seems that the main people reading my book are people

who want to go to the Russian Far East or they have been there, or they have some kind of personal connection to the area... I didn't know who my audience might be but it's quite a variety of people with some interest in that area" (from interview with Sharon), it surprised me that she did not include her Russian readers in her audience, given that she sent a copy of her book to at least four of her characters. It surprised me and it equally surprised the participants that she failed to predict (or did not think of it) the kind of reaction the book might trigger in Birobidjan. I think Pavel offered an interesting example of the impact any text – song lyrics, memoir, etc. – can produce on the audience.

The other day I was watching a TV show [with a band] called TAtu... [It was] about a song they sing about handicapped people... You know, no one in the audience said the most important thing, in my mind. Yes, you sing the song about handicapped and how they need to be drawn like kittens, and it is possible that you were singing not from the first person, but on behalf of someone else, the one who you don't like yourself, and so you just put these words into this someone's mouth... But I would say, guys, you know perfectly well that there emerge a group of young people in Russia that kill those who they believe are invalids. They simply kill them with baseball bats. And these young people are part of your audience! Do you think they will investigate the nuances of your addressability<sup>18</sup>? They will simply take it as a call for an action. This I also call insensitivity... You should understand who you sing to and who you address it to, strictly speaking. The same story with Sharon, you know? If she had addressed [the book] to Americans only, something you may call as a one-sided view, she couldn't be reprimanded for it then. There is no way this view can become more inclusive because this is the only one she has. If Americans like it, it's their problem. Although if this is the case, I, honestly, feel sorry that this culture is building itself so one-dimensionally. The flip side bothers me more though. You ALSO address this book to us, and in this case, I am sorry, but I have the right to have my opinion about it, and my opinion is quite strong. (from interview with Pavel)

Pavel, I think, makes an interesting point in his comments. He abstracts the memoir into a generalized phenomenon, both cultural and social, and contemplates its power that could be compared to the power of a nuclear reaction, created by a scientist

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<sup>18</sup> Pavel refers to Bakhtin's notion of addressability as a dialogical characteristic of an utterance, when every utterance has an addressee.

who may or may not understand its disastrous consequences, but yet continues the experiment. As a result, the power of the creation supersedes the power of its creator and, without control mechanisms (physical, political, social, cultural, etc.), may cause damage and destruction.

At this point, it would be logical to talk about Sharon's belonging to the discipline of journalism, because journalism, as part of mass media, shares their power to influence the society and participate in its cultural construction and reproduction. As the memoir writer concluded, Sharon seemed "to play both ends against the middle – acting like a journalist but not revealing it, and acting like a memoir writer but not applying the journalist ethics." Since I lack formal training in journalism, I addressed my questions to my third expert, a professor in the School of Journalism at a land grant university. She is a professional journalist and a lawyer, and teaches, among other courses, journalist law and ethics.

The professor explained that there is an ethical structure in journalism, i.e. a decision-making system that could be applied when a sensitive situation arises. Analogous to my previous conversations with the Director of Research Assurances and the memoir writer, she started with the purpose of the text – "What is the point of a journalist telling a story?" The professor stressed several times during our conversation that "journalism is a purposeful act," and the journalist always enters a situation with a professional goal in mind. From a teleological (utilitarian) point of view, this purpose is the greatest good for the greatest number of people. This is why journalists sometimes have to reveal painful but important information – to improve the life of people as a whole. The professor assessed Sharon's case though as "an accidental journalism" and

“journalism after the fact,” since it was not a purposeful act, but rather an afterthought.

Indeed, when Sharon recalled her decision to write the book, she said,

I didn't really think I was going to write a book about my experience. I was just keeping my journal, you know how it is, if you're a journal keeper. But when I got home and I would read excerpts from my journal at Peace Corps meetings to interested people, they kept saying, "Are you writing a book?" So I thought you know, why, I think that would be a great idea. I have enough material. So I started making a book. (from interview with Sharon)

Any journalist, though, according to the university professor, would always end up balancing the potential *harm* to someone versus the potential *benefit* to the society, which reminded me of *The Belmont Report* that helps guide the ethics of academic research. I assumed then, that, as in case with research, journalism should have a legal mechanism that regulates journalist ethics in writing.

Mass media law oversees many aspects of journalism, but, given the nature of the conflict brought about by the memoir, I was particularly interested in legal regulations that specifically address the issue of "Invasion of Privacy" (Pember and Calvert). According to Pember and Calvert, stories in *Beyond Siberia* would not be defined as intrusion (262-63), since most of the events described happened in public, and the author did not hide or gather her information secretly.

There is less certainty, however, when we assess the libel of publication of private information. In journalism, libel is defined as "the publication or broadcast of any statement that injures someone's reputation or lowers that person's esteem in the community" (Pember and Calvert 132). In these terms then, the memoir would be a clear case of libel. The court practice, however, shows that such cases are extremely difficult to fight in court. Thus, the court would habitually rule that "[if] a large segment of the

public is already aware of supposedly intimate or personal information, it is not private” (Pember and Calvert 278). Moreover, often “public interest trumps offensiveness.” In a court case, a failed “child prodigy” sued for revealing the story of his private life in *New Yorker* magazine, but a court “ruled that while the story might have embarrassed the man, the public enjoyed reading about the problems, misfortunes and troubles of their neighbors and members of the community” (Pember and Calvert 282-83). It seems to me, then, that the voyeuristic quality of our mass culture and a public obsession with the ‘reality show entertainment’ has become, unfortunately, the criteria for “newsworthiness” (Pember and Calvert 283).

It is important to remember, though, that, before the court, it is the job of journalists and editors to decide what is interesting and important for the public. As the university professor insisted, “there has to be some public purpose that merits disclosing private information.” For instance, a journalist may decide to reveal a name of a crime victim because it “adds credibility to a news story, makes the story more meaningful to readers” (Pember and Calvert 280). Similarly, Sharon made a conscious attempt to use “mostly real names because it is a true book and I wanted people to understand that” (from interview with Sharon). Her decision to name public figures in the book is also in perfect accordance with the journalism law: “When you write about a public official, a person who is a public person, like Anatoliy Surnin [the head of Birobidjan Pedagogical Institute], I can use his real name without his permission because he is a public figure. No problem there” (from interview with Sharon). And the rule states, “Any person who is elected to public office... qualifies as a public official” (Pember and Calvert 168). At the same time, Sharon kept working on making sure the rest of the names in the book, not

necessarily those of public figures, were real (in those cases when she did not ask people for permission to use their names) or at least sounded real:

I showed the names that I was using to a teacher here [in California], and he would say things like, “Well, this is a Ukrainian name and not a Russian name. And so that would be kind of more accurate... And I was e-mailing back and forth with L, asking her some questions about people. And sometimes she was able to identify people and give me their correct names. (from interview with Sharon)

I think this is a good example of constructing (or, as Hayden White would argue, fictionalizing “of factual representation,” “*representation*”) the reality and objectivity through language (using real or close to real names) in the very journalistic tradition, if, indeed, the journalists believe that using real names “adds credibility.” However, the very fact that this credibility can be *constructed* or *enhanced* by the particular decisions about language use adds to the poststructuralist argument about the rhetorical nature of language and reality. Therefore, what is presented as truth and objectivity can be and is constructed by those who have access to the right tools, i.e. by those who have power.

Interestingly, when Pember and Calvert explain the connection between the journalistic work and the First Amendment, the marketplace of ideas theory is discussed among others, to evaluate our understanding of freedom today. Admittedly, the marketplace metaphor is economics-based in the way that the ultimate good (ethics, cf. Plato) should be defined through free trade of ideas, and only the best idea eventually will be accepted in the competition of the market (Pember and Calvert 45). Critics, however, argue that “access to the marketplace is *not* equal for everyone” (Pember and Calvert 46, original emphasis). I will elaborate on this idea later in the chapter, when I discuss the material differences affecting the texts.

Therefore, it is clear that the discipline of journalism does have a regulatory mechanism, although the mechanism still functions on the challenged assumptions of truth and objectivity, as well as the power inequality (journalist's ideas are allowed much more access to the ideas marketplace and often are supported by court rulings – the official mechanism of power). In this light, it becomes, as the memoir writer stated earlier, a sole judgment call by those who make stories public. I believe it is even more difficult to do for journalists, who know that they will be protected by the notion of “newsworthiness” of their stories.

Journalists are not supposed to make judgments, they argue... But today people in the mass media, and even members of their audience, know that journalists make judgments every day of the week. What stories should be covered? Who should be quoted? How should the story be played? *Journalism is not now nor ever has been a purely objective activity...*

[The] ethics code of the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ)... reminds reporters to “recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm and discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance.” The SPJ's ethics code also instructs journalists to “show good taste. Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity.” (Pember and Calvert 288, emphasis added, MW)

Answering my question whether Sharon followed journalist ethics when she was writing her book, the university professor concluded, “She is not a journalist. She is lying to herself.” The professor suggested instead that *Beyond Siberia* may resemble more of a cultural anthropological observation. In this case, it was done in Russia, although it could be done anywhere, including the U.S. However, the professor noted that if the book was written about, for instance, people living on Indian reservations in North Dakota, the author would have been very careful with the legal aspect of it. “There is ethics and there is law,” the professor said. “People in the U.S. could sue [for using real names]. In fact, it

would be difficult to find a memoir using real names [of U.S. people] and with such [private] stories about them.”

I asked myself then, whether Sharon realized her immunity when writing about people who live so far away and have limited or no resources for repercussion, and whether she was taking advantage of the situation. After all, one of my participants expressed a similar concern:

**Pavel:** [The book’s] problem of addressability could and should be investigated. Because every text is addressed to someone. Mikhail Mikhaylovich Bakhtin once said that an author cannot have an alibi, you understand? If he [sic] has an alibi, he is not an author. But here it looks like an alibi. I live across an ocean, which means that I have an alibi and I am allowed to say whatever I want. (from interview with Pavel)

In this respect, I do not see much difference between *Beyond Siberia* and travel writing by colonizers, including traditional anthropological research. Both have good intentions and, seemingly, no hidden agendas. However, the power inequality of these texts – between the authors and the characters – produces dubious effects. The writers put an honest effort in creating an expressive account of events they witnessed. However, “expressivism... assumes individual autonomy apart from societal constraints, allows prejudice to remain unexamined, and treats all autobiographical stories as equally valid” (Clifford, qtd. in Ewoldt and Graham 34). As a result, the writer is absolutely sure that she is writing truth, whereas instead, she reproduces and represents the reality in accordance with her own biases, cultural schemata, and the position of power. This is why it becomes especially crucial for an author to “evaluate the usefulness and appropriateness of speaking for someone” (Ewoldt and Graham 45) by engaging in self-reflexivity and looking at “where the speech goes and what it does there” (Alcoff, qtd. in



Ewoldt and Graham 45). As the expert memoir writer I talked to noted, questioning her own motives and agendas when writing her memoirs helps her make difficult ethical decisions. *Beyond Siberia*, however, seemed to lack such self-reflexivity. I am willing to argue though that this shortcoming may not necessarily be the personal decision of the author. Another contextual element, the material differences in writing, should be analyzed, in order to understand “where the speech is coming from,” in addition to “where it goes” and “what it does there.”

### **Material Differences**

Earlier in the chapter an opinion was voiced that sharing stories of others in a memoir is a sole personal decision of the author monitored by her own ethical standards. I argue, however, that the material circumstances of the memoir production may have an impact on the author’s decisions. Berlin, for instance, criticized the “self-present subject of the Enlightenment,” who “is regarded as the author of all her actions, moving in complete freedom in deciding how she will live” (18) or write, in Sharon’s case. Berlin argued that, instead, the postmodern conception of the subject sees her as “the product of social and material conditions” (18). Therefore, to claim that all the participants of my projects, including the author of the memoir, her characters/my participants, other people I talked to, and myself, are given the freedom to independently represent their reality would be an illusion at best, according to the materialistic view.

Although recently framed in postmodern terms, the idea is not new. Marx viewed language as a material product, and the discourse it creates – as the material condition for ideas (*The German Ideology*). When Williams tried to recuperate Marx and connect his ideas with a more rhetorical perception of the world and culture, he also was interested in

the relationship between material conditions and the production of ideas. Finally, Althusser analyzed a similar ideological relationship but through specific human actions: “[The subject’s] *ideas are his [sic] material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive the ideas of that subject*” (158, original emphasis). I would like, therefore, to discuss what specific *material actions, practices, and rituals* became the material conditions for the ideas in the memoir production.

To begin with, it is important to understand that the memoir author and its characters have been in quite different material circumstances related to the book production and distribution. Granted, they have access to the advances in technology, such as computer and Internet (means of production for a Peace Corps writer), which allow them a convenient way to communicate and create an instant exchange of ideas, if necessary. However, availability of technology, a seemingly obvious example of globalization in the post-industrialized world, can still be an illusion that reproduces the modern claim of the “self-present subject” and her “complete freedom.” Zhang argued that

Globalization as an *idealized version* of the new intensity and saturation of the capitalist mode of production, above all as the new freedom of multinational corporations, however, *does not translate immediately or substantively into social and political freedom for either individual citizens of advanced capitalist countries or non-Western groups of national and non- or antinational varieties.* (33, emphasis added, MW)

This social and political freedom, as I understand it for the case I am researching, is the ability and willingness to use the available means of production to the same or similar extent as the author did, and with similar purposes. I argue that, even having

access to similar means of production (computer and Internet), the Russian participants are not conditioned by these means to use them in the way Sharon did. Consider, for instance, a case when an American character sent the author an e-mail message openly confronting the author and voicing her anger and frustration: “One of these women wrote me a very sad letter saying, ‘I thought you were my friend. How could you do this? How did you find out this information? You were prying into my life.’ It was really terrible and I wrote back and said, ‘I am very sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you.’ She was very angry” (from interview with Sharon). In this example, the American character said almost the exact words as the ones that I heard from the Russian characters, but she voiced her opinion right away, using the means she had (e-mail), probably without even thinking twice. The technological advances have been readily available to the majority, and have been mapping the communication and human interaction in the Western societies so rapidly, that they are not immediately (or ever) recognized by this majority as the material conditions for ideas (although many of those who teach can attest to the tremendous impact technology has on the ways students create and formulate their ideas). I may assume that the Russian society and individuals are not in the same relationship with these means of productions; therefore, they may not necessarily use them in the same way. The discussed example could be viewed as a *material action*.

To illustrate a *material practice*, I would like to discuss the practice of publishing a manuscript. As any practice, publishing *Beyond Siberia* involved specific material tools and agents. Here is the author’s story of publishing the book.

**Sharon:** We published it ourselves... My husband and I. We established our own publishing company and we published our own books. This came after two years of trying to find a publisher.

**Maria:** And you couldn't.

**Sharon:** Right. I thought the material was getting dated and I wanted to get this book out there... First, I sent my manuscript to several publishers and I wrote letters to several literary agents, and I finally found one who said, "I love your book. I want to work with you." So, she is my agent. She sent the book out to several people she knew, and there were a lot of good comments about it... But they said, "Well, we don't think there is much of a market for it. We don't think we can sell lots and lots of copies." So, even though they liked the book, they turned it down.

**Maria:** So, that was the main reason... that they said, we don't have the market for it?

**Sharon:** Right. They thought there wasn't big enough market. And I am not connected to any university, so I couldn't find an academic publisher either. Finally, we just decided, ok, we'll do it ourselves. So we got a Pagemaker program... I edited the book one last time, and chose the cover, and had an artist design how the book would look. And then we found some printers and got bids from them. And then we had it printed out and I put it on Amazon and in some book stores. And I got plenty of book reviews, and so I sold about 500 copies. Now I am out of copies. (from interview with Sharon)

On the one hand, the story of publishing *Beyond Siberia* is a classic example of capitalist entrepreneurship. On the other hand, it illustrates the notion of material practices: the author searches through available "tools" (letters to literary agents, general and academic publishers, software, bids from printers, start-up publishing company, online bookstore) and "agents" (publishers, literary agents, printers). She even adopts the business language of the publishers ("There is [not] much of a market for [the book]"). At this point, writing becomes a business enterprise and the writer becomes a business person. Although creating her own publishing business is a conscious decision of the author, it almost came naturally, since the material make-up of the society opens possibilities and encourages entrepreneurship. All the tools and agents happened to be readily available and accessible, something that the other side, the Russian participants, lacks.

Even the distribution channels seemed to be waiting for the book. The concept of online shopping is still new in Russia, whereas for an average American it is almost a part of her daily routine.

**Maria:** Do you know how the book is being distributed?

**Denis:** No.

**Maria:** You can actually buy it here from the Internet.

**Denis:** Yeah, I don't know about Russia though. It is probably not easy to buy this book in Russia, because shipping would not cover overseas expenses, only in the States, so I think it's difficult to buy it from here. (from interview with Denis)

For the author, the website is part of the business operation as well. She talks about it in very utilitarian terms and has a clear understanding of how her business works.

**Sharon:** You know Amazon.com?

**Maria:** Yes, this is where I got the book.

**Sharon:** Is it? Well, I looked at Amazon.com yesterday, and they say they have five copies of the book, even though I don't have any more, and the price has gone up (laughs). Because you know people can't find the book, so now they are actually charging \$64 for it, and I thought, that's really interesting... So, I think there is interest and yet, getting it published again, it's just a difficult thing.

**Maria:** Well, I don't know much about this thing online that's going on with Amazon, but if you find them to sell the book, do they send you like royalties or anything? How does that work?

**Sharon:** Well, as long as I had copies that I could send them, whenever Amazon.com has an order for my book, they let me know they had an order and then I shipped them that number of books and they sent them out to people. And every month they paid me money. So it worked out very well. And I didn't lose any money in the long run, even though we paid for it ourselves, it worked out ok. And we've done three other books since then, so I think we might call us a small publisher now. (from interview with Sharon)

The process of selling the book online described by the author presents an example of the *material ritual* that adds to the materialistic reality of the author's society, so different from the Russian one. In my mind, these material differences support the initial power inequality between the author and her characters as they belong to different materialistic realities. As Kincheloe and McLaren argue, "Economic factors can never be

separated from other axes of oppression” and “instrumental/technology rationality [is] one of the most oppressive features of contemporary society” (282). I see this oppression through both the surface and inner structures of the societies: through the obviously unequal access to and distribution of the post-industrial means of production throughout the societies, and through the way of thinking in the “first-world” societies and cultures that often favor the “instrumental/technology rationality” and marginalize what does not fit, e.g., the emotional/subconscious instinct.

My own way of producing this research, as in case with any academic research, illustrates similar *material actions, practices, and rituals*. I have access to the same technological resources as Sharon does, and even other resources that she may not have, e.g., extensive university library collections. When I needed to contact the memoir’s author, I used search tools, without thinking twice, and contacted her in the same way the American character did. The material practices of my work include designing and completing this research through the data collection using the means available in the university; writing drafts using my notebook computer, software, printer, etc.; and making the research public by framing it as a dissertation that will be uploaded to the university library collection (for a fee, since it is a business partnership between the university and the online publisher), where everyone, who has a computer and can access Internet, can read it. Transforming the dissertation into a manuscript and going through the process of finding a publisher, working with the editor, designer, etc. to get the product/book published also are parts of the material ritual, so familiar to all in the academy. One may even argue that, as any materialistic ritual, publishing in the academy contributes to maintaining power, inequality, and oppression. After all, many women

writing in our male-dominated disciplines might have experienced writing “in ‘inauthentic’ voices for the sake of professional survival” (Mortensen and Kirsch 568).

In the academy, we may not necessarily use the explicitly materialistic terms as Sharon did (“market,” “the price”), but the essence of this ritual is the same – benefits to the writer. Moreover, these benefits will always include some material rewards (royalties, promotion, pay raise, etc.) that are likely to be enjoyed by the author/researcher and to exclude those who also contributed to the written work (book characters and/or research participants). Thus, if we are completely honest about our writing, we should openly admit that even our best intentions (to tell the others’ stories, to give a voice to the silenced) will result in benefits for the privileged only, for those who control the power of the text production – the writer, the researcher – the author.

Finally, another important characteristic of material conditions and reality is their circular, or cyclic, nature. As Althusser claimed, under these circular conditions, individuals are hailed or interpellated as subjects in ideological discourse for the *reproduction* of the relations of production. Indeed, we keep reproducing our research and writing using the material conditions that accommodate this reproduction. (Note Sharon’s comment: “We’ve done three other books since then, so I think we might call us a small publisher now.” From interview with Sharon) As these material conditions keep developing (e.g., newer and better technology), we praise ourselves for producing a better research and traveling farther, to *represent* the Other. In reality, we re-produce the same power inequality and silence the Other even more. This power is intoxicating and we hardly recognize this silencing behind our *representation* (cf., Spivak’s “epistemic violence”). It happens in our research and it happens in other writing.

**Sharon:** We've done three other books since then, so I think we might call us a small publisher now.

**Maria:** Three other books with the same company you established, right?

**Sharon:** That we established ourselves, McSeas Books... Two of them are written by my husband... and one of them is called "Aliso" and then the subtitle is "A school for the Mexican children." And this is a book that he researched about segregation in Aliso school in California back in the 30s and 40s.

**Maria:** That's interesting.

**Sharon:** Yeah, that sold REALLY well around here because Mexican American people felt that nobody had told their story, so then [my husband] told their story. (from interview with Sharon)

The material interest is always present. We like to have our books sell well, our articles support tenure portfolios, etc. This motivation is further supported by the institutions we belong to, whether it is a university or the Peace Corps. Materialists like Althusser would call such institutions ideological formations that define material rituals. According to Althusser, such formations are represented through the system of Ideological State Apparatuses that could be religious, educational, family, legal, political, trade-union, communications, and cultural. They are a plurality of "realities which represent themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions" (Althusser 136) that "[have] been installed in the *dominant* position in mature capitalist social formations" (144, original emphasis).

Both the academy and Peace Corps could be regarded as Ideological State Apparatuses that provide their writers with tools, guidelines, and, most importantly, ethos necessary for claiming and maintaining the author's power and control of the text production. For instance, the university organizes workshops and lectures to assist their young faculty in their publishing agendas. Similarly, the organization called Peace Corps Writers ([www.peacecorpswriters.org](http://www.peacecorpswriters.org)) provides a series of activities to those volunteers who want to write and publish. These activities mirror the academic ones (writing



workshops, conferences, readings, even awards), as well as supply useful ‘tools’ for the *business* of publishing a book. The link “Resources” on the organization’s website gives the names and contact information of “friendly agents, editors, and publishers”; information on how to arrange self-publishing, online publishing, and through smaller publishing houses; and even “how to write a novel in 100 days” (peacecorpswriters.org).

Interestingly enough, I could not find any guidelines for ethics in writing among all the resources. When I asked the Peace Corps Writers’ editor (in an e-mail message!) whether they offer any help when their writers face ethical dilemmas, he answered, “We do not offer any services beyond trying to network and promote [Peace Corps] writers.” When asked how many writers asked for such help, he said, “I have no idea how many people asked me about these issues, maybe one or two,” which is a disturbing number given that currently (May 2008) there are 916 registered Peace Corps writers. The editor, however, offered some general advice:

I think you might talk to a lawyer about the legal issues; however, I would suggest you write your book the best way that you can, then use pseudonyms... I get the sense that you are 'afraid' of what you might write and from my experience as a writer and college professor and editor is that if this is the case, you might not want to write anything, as you seem to be hesitant about 'writing the truth' and that, of course, will affect your writing. As you know, if you cannot be totally 'honest' on the page, well, it will show in the prose. (from e-mail communication, April 9, 2008)

A month later, the same Peace Corps Writers editor e-mailed me and further developed his argument. This time, however, he was more judgmental in his assessment of my inquiries and research questions: “As an academic myself, I find these to be the dumbest questions I have ever gotten, congratulations!” In the next message, he tried to explain his point of view: “The reason I find these questions ‘dumb’ as [sic.] they have

nothing to do with literature and language” (from e-mail communication, May 10 and 11, 2008).

Aside from the apparent unwillingness from the editor’s part to discuss challenging ethical issues, “writing the truth” seem to be the concern shared by both Sharon and the editor, and this concern is materialized through the institute of Peace Corps’ discourse (similar to the concern of justice materialized through the institute of IRB’s regulations for academic research). Truth seems to be the main measure for ethics in writing. Ewoldt and Graham quote Baroni, who argues, “If your statement is true, it isn’t libel. Truth is an absolute defense” (38). Yet, this is an arguable statement for the postmodern discussion, especially if we consider that truth and justice have been top values for Western societies, but not necessarily for other societies and cultures. Let me discuss briefly how different cultural outlooks may impact our views on ethics in writing

### **Cultural Differences**

The discussion in previous chapters mentioned that some participants see in the memoir an example of a text written in and for a particular culture, a U.S. culture. Some participants felt that the text of the memoir reflected the culture for which it was written:

**Vasiliy:** Every nation has some problem [of its own]. It’s intolerance of the Russians, egocentrism of the Americans, nationalism of the Chinese... There is a certain negative feature that belongs to a whole nation or at least the majority of it. And this is why this needs to be accepted as a fact. And Sharon is not different from other Americans.

**Maria:** So, the book was written, you think, by a representative of this culture and nation, and for this culture and nation, these readers?

**Vasiliy:** I would even say it was written to order. A national order. (from interview with Vasiliy)

The fact that the participants felt the memoir reflected the culture of its author reminds me of an earlier observation that, in hearings about journalistic intrusion in

private lives, the court often rules in favor of the reporter. The courts work in the context of the culture as well, and the culture has a voyeuristic quality that makes the author (journalist and writer, as in Sharon's case) look for "newsworthiness" in their stories. Clifford ("Introduction") reviews a critique of this Western voyeurism as a tool for "objectification" of the Other. He recalled Ong, who argued that "the *truth of vision* in Western, literature cultures has predominated over [other] evidences... The predominant metaphors... have been participant-*observer*, data collection, and cultural description, all of which presuppose a standpoint *outside* – looking at, objectifying, or, somewhat closer, 'reading,' a given reality" (Clifford "Introduction" 11, emphasis added, MW). When I asked Sharon how she managed to make sense out of the situations that were culturally different, she answered, "Once in a while I would try to understand by asking questions. [But] usually, I would just try to observe and figure it out." (from interview with Sharon).

The Russian participants sensed this position of a cultural outsider very well, as well as the power and exclusiveness it carried. Some generalized and clearly explained this position by the exclusiveness of the culture itself:

**Pavel:** As for Sharon... This, unfortunately, makes her resemble that part of Americans, and this is my opinion, my feeling, and I don't mean all Americans... I do know [American] people who are exceptions from this rule... But it's that part of Americans who are not ready to recognize any other reality, besides their own, as a normal one... To a certain extent, I think, Sharon's book is the result of such a position, such Americocentrism, so to say... (from interview with Pavel)

Pavel's comments seem to echo Fabian's critique that "taxonomic imagination in the West is strongly visualist in nature, *constituting* cultures as if they were *theaters of memory*, or spatialized arrays" (Clifford "Introduction" 12, emphasis added, MW). In the theater of *Beyond Siberia*, the author is a director who has the power over the actors and

the way the play will look on the stage, and the readers simply sit in the audience, where they can see only what the director allowed to happen on the stage. There is an artificial gap then between the play and real life, and between the stage and the audience. A similar gap has been created, probably unconsciously, by the memoir author.

**Pavel:** I wouldn't want to make any general conclusions. [But] there is a certain, I would call it, centrism here. When a person builds some opaque glass between [her] own world and habits, and the rest of the world, you know? You may complain about it, but it would be in vain. This is just the way this person's life happened. The way his [sic] consciousness has been constructed. (from interview with Pavel)

The theater metaphor supposes an existence of a scenario, or a certain way the information is given or stories told. This way of giving information and telling stories is also culture-linked to a certain extent. Take, for instance, the earlier discussion of "newsworthiness" in journalistic stories. Vasilii recalled his own experience of traveling to the U.S. and argued that in the U.S. culture, the audience dictates what kind of information they want to be given or what stories they want to hear, which, I think, can be true in any culture.

**Maria:** All the reviews [of *Beyond Siberia*] are written by Americans... [and these are] only praising reviews, about how they now know the real Russians and what their real lives look like. In other words, you think there is no objectivity there, but the American readers think that there is.

**Vasilii:** An explanation is very simple. First of all, it's the egocentrism of the American nation. The nation is very egocentric, the center of the Universe, the only super-nation in present days. And so Americans heard what they wanted to hear. That's it. In other words, [Sharon] was working for them... When I was in America, I visited... a church... There they had a Holocaust victim give a speech. He was telling how, when Hitler came to power, this person was taken to a wooden barrack and had to do pushups for three days. And then he immigrated. Well, he was introduced as a Holocaust victim. So, [they] didn't want to know or hear about gas chambers, executions, burning of people, etc. They wanted [this information] in an "American dose." That's it. Americans are the nation that lives comfortably and doesn't want to understand problems of others. They live by

themselves and are given sometimes certain doses of [negativity], just to get a little of adrenaline pumping, nothing more. (from interview with Vasiliy)

In a way, Vasiliy elaborates on the theater metaphor when he talks about receiving the information in the “American dose”: The audience comes to the show with certain expectations and they want to be entertained according to the ticket price. When they buy a book about the Peace Corps experience, they probably expect to read stories that do not contradict what they already know about Peace Corps, an organization that trains volunteers to be goodwill ambassadors in underdeveloped countries, which, I argue, can support yet another ideological reincarnation of colonizing practices. They are uncomfortable with any other position than an outsider, an observer, who, after the show is over, will return home. This is probably why the readers accepted the book very well, and those who contributed to it with their stories, the insiders, did not.

It would be wrong, I think, to argue that the author deliberately planned on alienating her characters and directing the production where she put them on display, like puppets. Rather, writing the memoir this way may simply have come to her naturally, as part of her culture. It might be equally problematic to claim that “she is who she is.” “[N]o attempt at analyzing our assumptions is neutral or value-free; it is always a culturally and politically charged activity” (Kirsch and Ritchie 10). We have been conditioned to act (and write) in a certain way, due to our cultures and values they install in us, along with other aspects of the context. After all, “we can never fully step outside our culture in order to examine our assumptions, values, and goals” (Kirsch and Ritchie 10). Denis, who had lived in the U.S. for a while, as a student, and who also studied

linguistics, tried to explain the process of learning cultural practices and misinterpreting them, from his own cross-cultural experience:

**Denis:** Some things did not surprise me at all because I lived in the U.S.A. for one year and I understand many views Americans have about Russia... When you return home [from the U.S.], you may do comparisons. So, that point of view that [Sharon] was using to compare the two cultures was familiar to me.

Even when you learn a second language... you always compare it with your first, native language... Similarly, studying a different culture, or, in this case, writing about a different culture, is an attempt ... to describe it, and such a description is dictated by the author's perceptions, already formed perceptions. The person has lived her life in her home country and has formed certain stereotypes of thinking. It may sound negatively, but she does have her own point of view, and when she writes, her writing will definitely be colored by her first, native culture. (from interview with Denis)

When I discuss my data for this research, I, too, act from a certain cultural standpoint. In my case, though, it would be useful to talk about an even bigger cultural interference. Thanks to my background, I belong to the culture of the Russian characters in *Beyond Siberia*. I understand and share their cultural values; they are my values. But half of my family – on my husband's side – is American, and I have lived in this country for almost eight years. I share their cultural values as well; they are my values, too. Moreover, as a PhD candidate who received her M.A. and is finishing her dissertation in a U.S. land grant university, I write this research from the cultural standpoint shared within the discipline. I am at the intersection then of the two cultures (Russian and U.S.) and two discourses (Western academic research and memoir). I hear voices from both sides and blend them, trying to recognize the dominant ones, the ones that, together with dominant discourses, “shape our vision of reality” (Kincheloe and McLaren 283). This position, I hope, helps me avoid evaluating one culture against another and one discourse practice against another, which would end in reproducing binary oppositions once again.

It is easy though to slip into the binaries, generalizations, and essentializing when taking one particular side and speaking from it. The text of *Beyond Siberia* is one example of it; however, my conversations with the participants sometimes revealed judgments similar to Sharon's when she relied on a few observations to draw conclusions.

**Elena:** I wouldn't like to talk about the whole country, America, but the fact that it's characteristic of American point of view... The one that is trying to see a scandal in everything. (from interview with Elena)

**Pavel:** I had the following observation when I was in America. I know some English. My English is not so good... But I've got some English-speaking friends, so I had to start using the language. And usually, when I visit the States, I don't have [language] problems in the streets. But once I witnessed a situation with a person who did not speak English... and so right away, in front of my eyes, a wall of psychological alienation was built towards this person. If I compare this with Russia, however... something may not be very good in Russia, and we have something that is very bad. But here, no one ever would treat scornfully a person just because of one thing – because this person does not share the same language with you. Moreover, here he [sic] would be treated in a very protective way; we would try to help him, right? (from interview with Pavel)

I would probably disagree with making such generalizations about culture as a whole. However, as I look back to my first experiences in the U.S., I recall that first I saw differences and contrasts with Russia, my home country. After several years, I came to understand the values behind most of these contrasts and learned to look past the unpleasant experiences, since the sum of positive ones would always outweigh the negative. I have managed to build bridges between the two cultures I belong to now, and appreciate both, for similarities and differences equally. I do feel though that Sharon, after two years in Russia, remained on the side of her own culture, and did not quite manage to abandon the outsider position.

The position of an outsider may have determined in many ways how the book was written, including the author's ethical decisions. Since the author was writing from the cultural viewpoint that has truth and justice as predominant values (cf., earlier discussion of academic writing, journalism, etc.), these values determined the ethics she used in writing, namely, the ethics of justice (It is just to tell truth; since I saw everything with my own eyes, my story is a true account, thus, ethical.). In my mind, though, it is important, especially when we write about other cultures, to consider that there might be other values and other ethics in those cultures. Since I have not done specific research on Russian culture and society, but rely only on my own understanding of it as a native Russian, I would not claim that Russian culture does not value truth or justice. It is valid to assume, however, that the strong reaction by the Russian characters (as opposed to the lack of thereof by the American characters) might signal some additional values and alternative ethics that could have guided those reactions.

Recent research has suggested alternative readings of ethics, in both rhetoric and other disciplines. For instance, feminist philosophy “[disavows] traditional rule-governed ethics based on ‘universal’ principles and on unbending rules, because acting from principle entails acting without experience and context, without a politics of location... An ethic of care often comes to different conclusions than an ethic of principle” (Kirsch and Ritchie 21). Similarly, in psychological research, Gilligan introduced an ethic of care as “a moral perspective different from that currently embedded in psychological theories and measures” (327). In her argument, Gilligan juxtaposed an ethic of care in response to an ethic of justice and rights as the contrast between “male and female voices,” in order to “highlight a distinction between two models of thought and to focus a problem of



interpretation” (327). Gilligan’s argument is a critique of the earlier research by Kohlberg that argued, “The key to the isolation and classification of moral judgment structure... was to hold a *single*-minded focus on reasoning about *prescriptive* moral judgment” (514, emphasis added, MW). To this, Gilligan suggested,

My critics equate care with feeling, which they oppose to thought, and imagine caring as passive or confined to some separate sphere. I describe care and justice as two moral perspectives that organize both thinking and feelings and empower the self to take different kinds of action in public as well as private life. (326)

The Kohlberg-Gilligan debate is about gender differences, of course. But it is also about different cultural experiences attributed to genders. As Gilligan argued against the prescriptive moral judgment based on the male-oriented ethic of justice, I similarly argue against relying solely on the ethic of justice and truth, a predominant cultural imperative based on Western values and rhetoric, when writing about the Other. For instance, it would be interesting to investigate other, alternative ethics, such as an ethic of mercy, in relation to moral decision making in different cultures.

As discussions in earlier chapters showed, the Russian participants question the ethic of truth and justice (“the greatest good for the greatest number of people”), and do not see value in revealing some private information, even when those are true facts that have “newsworthiness” in them. Instead, the values of trust and friendship that the participants often mentioned seem to be prevalent. Moreover, the intimacy of the ‘inner circle’ that I discussed earlier generally expects that the information shared within this circle will not be made public. These seemed to be the implied values clear to all of the Russian participants, yet, missed by the author of the memoir.

Concluding our conversation, Elena shared a story that taught her a way to approach cultural differences:

**Elena:** It is very important to talk [about culture] with respect. Last year I took professional development courses in St. Petersburg and there... You know, how we have so many jokes about Eskimos that generally tell how not very smart are these people. So, we had classes about intercultural communication. And our instructor said that the Eskimos language has 17 words to describe the color white.

**Maria:** Because of snow?

**Elena:** Yes. Because of snow. Because this is their CULTURE. And she said it with a lot of respect. In a similar way, Eskimos could say about us that we [are not very smart] and have only one word [for the color white]. In other words, if you treat without respect the culture of the country that you visit, then you won't be respected as well. And [in that culture] they will see ONLY negative sides in you as well.

Elena talks about the boomerang effect here. The Russian participants sensed the power inequality of the situation and resisted it, as many earlier comments by the participants revealed. In their resistance, some participants expanded their negative reaction beyond the individual, the author of *Beyond Siberia*, to challenge the ethos of the Peace Corps as well and the ideology behind it.

**Pavel:** First, I am talking about the mission with which these people come here. Second, about the cultural stereotypes that everyone needs to... how to put it... Don't they evaluate the person before they send him [sic] some place? Well, in terms of some characteristics or according to some criteria?... I don't know according to what criteria people end up in Peace Corps, honestly. I imagine that in the Kennedy's time there might still be some criteria. I doubt they still exist. They should though. First of all, people are going to a completely different country. You may say that, in a certain sense, they are going on a spacewalk. And you have to understand how to behave on a spacewalk. And this is exactly what I did not see [in the Peace Corps]. And I think this is... there is a word that I don't really like, "counterproductive." But it characterizes the situation well. The situation is counterproductive. They want one thing but achieve quite the opposite. And then everyone is surprised why Russians are so anti-American. Why does Russia somewhat always frown at America? Well, "frown" is an exaggeration, of course, but don't give us the reason to. Just don't give the reason. But you do give us the reason on every step of the way, including things like this [book]. (from interview with Pavel)

It is clear then that the material production of the book had a distinct ideological effect. Unfortunately, the effect turned out to be opposite to the goodwill mission of the Peace Corps. The book seems not only to jeopardize the author's ethos of a Peace Corps' volunteer but to compromise the whole mission of the Peace Corps she represented, as it was viewed by the Russian participants. Pavel was very direct in his argument:

**Pavel:** There is a problem of a certain ideology brought by Peace Corps. So, here I think it's time to have all the Ts crossed. Why do Americans come here? If they come looking for negative impressions, this is one side of the coin. Then don't call it Peace Corps, call it something like War Corps (laughs). If the mission is something else, explain it to us. If it's about a mutual understanding, then, excuse me, books like Sharon's produce quite the opposite effect. (from interview with Pavel)

I thought it was interesting that Pavel bought up the war metaphor, the same metaphor I saw in *Beyond Siberia* when the author described their groups of returned volunteers like war veterans. She quoted a message she had received from another former volunteer after her return home: "We [returned volunteers] became a very special family, I suspect like old war buddies. I hope when you come home you will join this group. I do want you to come up and stay a while. We can hold hands and tell each other war stories" (*Beyond Siberia* 308). In a way, I think, the war metaphor illustrates two points in my argument: the voyeuristic culture and the colonizing ideology. A cynic would say, privileged, powerful, and wealthy (as compared to the natives in the countries they visit) men and women kill two birds with one stone. First, they receive their very carefully measured dose of adrenalin through exotic travels, just like explorers in the old days (still thrilling but relatively safe; it is not a war after all, it is just fun to talk about it that way). Second, this mission makes them feel good about themselves; after all, they volunteer

two years of their comfortable and civilized life to help those who do not live comfortable and civilized lives, which is another proof that comfortable and civilized lifestyle (*their* lifestyle) should prevail. As a researcher (who is cynical sometimes), I would argue that this is not what the Peace Corps volunteers think about their travels, but it *is* part of their travels. They bring it with them in their backpacks unconsciously, because their context – the blend of material, political, social, and cultural forces – creates for them this position of power and superiority, whether they admit it or not. The war metaphor both sides use so freely brings the idea of conquering with it. In the power misbalance that I outlined in this research, who do you think is the conqueror and who is the conquered?

The problem, I think, lies in the inability to ask these questions before exercising this power through such potent means as writing. This refers not only to Peace Corps memoir writing, although this was the original focus of my research. Similar questions should be asked by everyone else who writes about the Other, including researchers, possibly even more so. As Kirsch and Ritchie repeated after Foucault, “observation, classification, and codification in the discourse of the academy are always exercises of power, sometimes more coercive than others” (16). I am positive that my own ethos of a researcher became a convincing factor for many participants and, in many ways, determined the topics we discussed and how we discussed them. I did try to reflect on my own role in this research and analyze how my own views affected the outcomes of the project. However, following Clifford’s quote “I’m not sure I can tell the truth... I can only tell what I know” (“Introduction” 8), I would hesitate claiming that I have located the true representation of the Other and did it in the most ethical way. After all, “any

location is fluid, multiple, and illusive” (Kirsch and Ritchie 8), and the researcher’s job is to continue uncovering many sides of representation and ethics.

It is important to realize that the contextual features (discipline, material, and cultural differences) that I briefly outlined in this chapter directly relate to and contribute to the ideology that, in turn, also guides our decisions about ethics. When Kincheloe and McLaren defined ideology, they clearly linked it to culture, language, and politics: “Ideology [is] a highly articulated worldview, master narrative, discursive regime, or organizing scheme for collective symbolic production. The dominant ideology is the expression of the dominant social group” (303). This is an interdependent relationship. Ideology supports the exercises of power through the discourses that are allowed and approved by those who hold this power. In return, these discourses re-produce the power and sustain (or distribute) the ideological production. In a broader context, when placed in the reality of the Other, this relationship is met with resistance, since the Other is excluded from the production, whereas the production is realized at the Other’s expense and is not necessarily restricted to Peace Corps writing only. When asked his opinion about other Peace Corps writers, Pavel broadened the situation and added political implications to it as well.

**Pavel:** I think the problem is very serious and unsolvable, at least within some visible historical perspective, if you speak about America... Say, there are some foreign policy indicators, right? There is an understanding there, like, we [in the U.S.] are those who carry all the best of humankind and we have the right, therefore, to foist this best. And if you are not willing to accept it, in that case... well, you know, it’s a well-known problem. Why does America have problems with the Near East, the Middle East... and generally all over the world? I think Americans very rarely and inefficiently ask themselves this question: Why aren’t we liked in the world?... This question NEEDS to be asked one day. Because, even when they ask it, they answer it in just one way: Because everyone else is far behind us and our life style. This is wrong. This is wrong... One very nice guy

from Michigan told me once... He, by the way, in comparison to the general American cultural type, was a black sheep... Anyway, he said once, "You know, Americans are being liked everywhere." I said, "Jack, but... (laughs) Who told you that?" He said, "See, everyone smiles to us in Russia." I said, "Yes, probably because you are in Russia." But even in Russia there have been some changes when, you know, these impressions of American behavior in other countries have been accumulated. And in Russia, too. I, anyway, follow the Internet discussions and what young people talk about in chat rooms, blogs, etc. You know, anti-Americanism has almost become a value for many young people of various political orientations: from communist to liberal. In other words, America is becoming... well, like a word with a negative connotation. And I guess, guys from Peace Corps involuntarily have contributed to it. (from interview with Pavel)

Pavel, I think, raises a very important problem. It is the problem of repercussions and consequences of our writing. On the one hand, there were very specific changes in people's behavior in Birobidjan after the book was released:

**Maria:** People in Birobidjan told me that this situation [with the book] affected a lot the way they started thinking about all other Americans who would come to work there. The attitude was different. They became careful and did not build any friendly and open relationships any more.

**Vasiliy:** ABSOLUTELY true. Moreover, they even started picking on [other Americans] and tried to find something negative where there wasn't any. (from interview with Vasiliy)

On the other hand, it is important to realize that everything we do and write will add to the totality of social and ideological practices that we re-create through our writing. I would not like to generalize but it is a fact that the Peace Corps did not stay long in Russia. There is even a mentioning of it in the book: "This year, there would be no new Peace Corps volunteers coming to Russia. The Russian government didn't approve their visas" (*Beyond Siberia* 342). Of course, one book does not create a political conflict. Yet, it is important for all of us who write to assume responsibility for our writing about other people and question our motives, methods, and genres of writing, because all together they contribute to the power distribution and ideological production.

If we participate in such self-reflexivity, hopefully, it would be more difficult for us to hide behind our power status of a writer and say:

If I show up in somebody's memoir, I might feel the same way. And yet that's the nature of that genre is that you're pulling things from your past and you're trying to recall them as best as you can. And if other people are in there and they were part of your life, and they don't feel that it was fair for you to do this to them... that's just the breaks [laughs]. That's an awful thing to say. You shouldn't probably quote me saying "that's the breaks." What I mean is that that's just the nature of a memoir. (from interview with Sharon)

## Chapter 7. Not a conclusion

“It is more than ever crucial for different peoples to form complex concrete images of one another, as well as the relationships of knowledge and power that connect them. But no sovereign scientific method or ethical stance can guarantee the truth of such images. They are constituted – the critique of colonial modes of representation has shown at least this much – in specific historical relations of dominance and dialogue.” (Clifford “On Ethnographic Authority” 119)

In my project, I tried to break away from a traditional understanding of qualitative research, and the roles of researcher and participants. I purposefully started with questioning the traditional and, as I argued, limiting assumptions behind knowledge production, power distribution, and ethical reasoning. In my research, I deconstructed not only these assumptions, but my research as well, in order to further complicate the discussion of power, ethics, and representation in non-fiction writing. This final chapter concludes my project; it suggests possible answers to my research questions, as well as directions and topic for future research.

My argument about representation and ethics of non-fiction writing centered around the production of a Peace Corps memoir and my own study, and was similar to White’s argument about construction of such supposedly neutral and objective discourse as history. According to White, “[the historians] did not realize that the facts do not speak for themselves, but that the historian speaks for them, speaks on their behalf, and fashions the fragments of the past into a whole whose integrity is – in its *representation* – a purely discursive one” (125). Similarly, in my project I argued that other discourses, such as memoirs and/or academic research, are hardly neutral or objective either. There are multiple factors that affect and potentially determine the writer’s decisions; these



influences interested me in this project. Let me review my research questions and offer possible answers.

The following were the research questions for my study:

- What factors influence decisions about ethics and representation in non-fiction writing?
- How does the situation of intercultural communication affect these decisions?

My research has proved that the factors influencing our decisions about ethics and representation are multiple and contextual. I ended up creating a multilayered study, with three most obvious layers, to address such factors as interrelations between the author and the characters of the memoir, my own influence as a researcher, and situational components (discipline, material, and cultural differences). As I was working on the research, I was tempted, however, to add more layers, and I would have done so, if I had more time or was writing a book, not a dissertation project. For instance, it would be interesting to have a separate chapter devoted solely to Peace Corps as an institution that supports Peace Corps memoir writing ideologically, materially, and politically. In this situation, the ethos of Peace Corps becomes an important rhetorical tool for creating representation and power that may indirectly support certain political agendas. After all, Foucault argued that power never acts “directly and immediately” but may “[guide] the possibility of conduct and [put] in order the possible outcome” (Foucault, qtd. in Bushman 183). These factors, therefore, cannot and should not be limited to the ones I focused on in my research, but need to be expanded and further layered in accordance with the particular writing situation.

The fact that the ethical conflict of the memoir production was intercultural in nature added to the complexity of the issues and advanced my argument about the role of power in the act of representation. The Russian characters and my research participants were in a disadvantageous position, due to their geographical location and lack of resources, including access to the necessary tools that could help in publicly responding to the memoir and getting their voices heard. As compared to any U.S. characters or research participants, the Russian characters also were more vulnerable due to the simple facts that English was not their first language and they lived in a culture that may not encourage public discussions of private matters. On the one hand, they were not allowed power during the memoir production; on the other hand, when given power (e.g., when they were asked to contribute to the drafts by providing comments and, if necessary, requests for changes), they would not necessarily act in an assertive way and actually use this power. Thus, I received verbal feedback from two participants, Pavel and Denis, but only Pavel also e-mailed me specific comments.

Given this situation of intercultural exchange – one-way in the memoir writing and both ways in the research production – I still am willing to consider this exchange as yet another way of practicing colonization. Although lacking on the surface the colonizing agenda and methods, underneath the surface, the power inequalities and co-opting strategies of representation through writing result in similar outcomes, just as more traditional colonizing practices of the past. Without careful consideration, and, if possible, equal cooperation with the Other/the subject, this subject may feel being used and misrepresented (colonized), even when the writer has her best intentions in mind

while creating the representation. In other words, the subject becomes a classic example of the subaltern, or the Orient, in Spivak and Said's sense.

My own research demonstrated that it is difficult to avoid speaking *for* the Other and objectifying the Other through *representation* (i.e., reviving colonizing practices), because being the author implies having and exercising the power that comes with this position. Additionally, as the study showed, the existing discipline, material, and cultural conditions contribute to and sometimes even encourage the practices of *representing*. In this situation, it is the writer's ethical choice and responsibility to actively look for ways to give up some of this power, to allow room for the Other's own representation and voice. The feminist methods of research that I used for this project helped me in my own attempt to challenge and change the power misbalance that usually is present in any research involving human subjects.

However, there are several critical moments that, I believe, are worth further discussion and consideration. First, I would like to remind of the questions asked at the end of my methodology chapter, right before I started analyzing the data, the questions posed by Kirsch and Ritchie, "Who benefits from the research/theories? What are the possible outcomes of the research and the possible consequences for research participants? Whose interests are at stake? How and to what extent will the research change social realities for research participants?" (20) These were the questions that I tried to address during my data analysis. Pavel, too, somewhat answered Kirsch and Ritchie's inquiries in his feedback that he sent to me: "Your work seems to me very necessary. Not because it can all of a sudden change something, overcome ethnocentrism, and like, not at all... The point is to demonstrate and explain an alternative way of

thinking about and an attitude towards another culture's reality" (from e-mail communication, May 6, 2008).

Granted, I am still the major beneficiary of my research, who will enjoy the practical outcomes (graduate degree, employment, etc.). However, in a broader context, both theoretical and practical, I would like to believe that my work has contributed to a change. This is a change in our perception of what we write, how we write it, and, most importantly, how our writing affects those we write about. Pavel was able to locate this focus of my work and articulate it from his own standpoint:

I think you are absolutely right when you focus on the methodology [of writing]. "Sharon's problem"... is that she does not employ any self-reflexivity – as an author and an individual. Or she may not be able to. Then there is a question of why she is unable to do it. But it is impossible to simply point out the reasons why... What is possible though, and what actually may bring some results, is to go ahead and demonstrate how an author can act *differently*, without slipping into the sin of arrogant mentoring. (from e-mail communication, May 6, 2008, original emphasis)

Additionally, in my work, I tried to develop my argument further and demonstrate that, when our writing is supported by social *institutions* (e.g., academy, Peace Corps, etc.), this writing contributes to the existing social order and power distribution. This relationship is reciprocal. I am backed up by my academic institution, just as Sharon is backed up by the status of a Peace Corps volunteer; these positions give us both power to write and *represent*. In return, our writing and representation support our institutions by the knowledge and truth that we supposedly create. And what can traditionally be of a higher value than knowledge and truth, in the Western society where we both live? Those who possess knowledge and truth possess power, and this is what we give back to our institutions. Thus they gain more power; the cycle is complete. I think it is important to

continue this conversation about the institutions we, as writers, belong to, and about the intriguing web of writing, knowledge, power, and voices in the already complex mix of all other factors contributing to our writing decisions. As Evans noted,

[Institutions] are voices as well as the means of production, communication, and other reproductive functions of society. Because they are the means of the reproduction of society, they are both more mute (we do not usually recognize that they are voices) and more audible (their effects are more pervasive) than straightforwardly linguistic ones. In this reproductive role, moreover, they often limit the degree to which other voices might increase their range and audibility. (416)

We generally have little consideration of the institutions' presence in the writing process. However, given their power to discipline and limit the voices, I believe that it is crucial for writers and researchers to continue analyzing the institutions they belong to and, most importantly, the relationship between these institutions and writing.

Another important direction that I would suggest for future research projects is a continuing search for silences and voices left out of the conversation, or even a particular part of the conversation. Although "the ethnographer transforms the research situation's ambiguities and diversities of meaning into an integrated portrait," "it is important to notice what has dropped out of sight" (Clifford "On Ethnographic Authority" 132). The fact that several years have passed since the events described in *Beyond Siberia*, and that the stories have been retold several times by several people (including myself) results in "[t]he actuality of discursive situations and individual interlocutors [being] filtered out" (Clifford "On Ethnographic Authority" 132). It also would be interesting to continue an analysis of existing gaps in my own narrative as a researcher. For instance, most of the participants chose not to follow-up with their feedback or suggestions on the research drafts. Why did they choose not to exercise this power? What ended up left out because

of this decision? How does this decision by the participants affect the credibility of the researcher and her work? These are the questions that I find interesting to continue exploring.

Finally, I think it is important to continue studying the role language plays in shaping, developing, and changing the reality, particularly through writing as a means of knowledge production. This project, with its particular attention to the factors surrounding the process of writing (including its participants, contextual features, etc.), demonstrated that writing is always a value-driven activity that also contributes to creating values. As White claimed,

The issue of ideology points to the fact that there is no value-neutral mode of emplotment, explanation, or even description of any field of events, whether imaginary or real, and suggests that the very use of language itself implies or entails a specific posture before the world which is ethical, ideological, or more generally political: not only all interpretation, but also all language is politically contaminated. (129).

Such an understanding of writing and language should allow more sensitivity on the part of the writer, in terms of her decisions about the ethics and representation in her narrative. Both non-fiction writers and researchers in the academy bear the responsibility to critically evaluate what is behind their motives and written products.

I would like to finish my work with one last story and one last quote. The quote is from Sharon Dirlam, the author of *Beyond Siberia*, and the story is about a good friend of mine, who writes about others. My friend is a white, educated American, and she writes about Africa. She travels to Africa, and writes using her observations and personal encounters with African culture and people. Ever since I started my project two years ago, I have been sharing with her almost every step of it, including my emotions,

frustrations, ideas, and problems. Recently, she spent another several months in Africa, to collect material for her book. After her return, I was anxious to hear the stories and the updates about her book. When I asked about it, she said jokingly, “Do you realize that you, with your project, have completely messed up my writing?” Then, in a more serious tone, she explained that she did not feel it right any more to hold all the power as a writer who compiles all those stories about the others in her book. She changed the way she was writing it: When still in Africa, she was sharing her notes with the people there, who she was writing about, to make sure she had recorded the events correctly and had not misinterpreted anything. Upon her return, she started writing drafts and sharing them with the characters of her book; these characters were allowed to make changes and include their own stories. “So, who is the author of your book now?” I asked. “The funny thing about creative, non-academic, writing,” she said, “is that you don’t really have multiple authors of a single book, so it would still be me. Although the cover of my book will have my name and the line ‘written with,’ where I will make sure they include the names of those who contributed.” “Would it be like ‘Acknowledgements’?” I asked. “No,” she said, “I want their names *on the cover*.”

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Some people said they wished they had written about their experiences, too. In fact, there is another Peace Corps volunteer, who is writing a book about his experiences. He is at the University of Michigan... And he’s been struggling with his stories for all these years, and he has been wanting to write about it. And now he is going to do that. (from interview with Sharon)

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